

Sleight of Hand & Twist of Fate by LadyBoBo

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Summary:

It's not like it was love at first sight. Not for Steve, and certainly not for Billy. Sure, they were attracted to each other, but that was a silent admission kept deep down in their own thoughts. Way deep.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I have ideas about where this is going, but I'm mostly just playing. I'll add characters and tags as I go along. If you like it, let a girl know. Feedback keeps it flowing.

It's not like it was love at first sight. Not for Steve, and certainly not for Billy. Sure, they were attracted to each other, but that was a silent admission kept deep down in their own thoughts. Way deep.

To Steve's credit, he was the one who was a little more forthcoming with *that* personal truth. Billy was still running from himself at that point. But even that attraction fell away to nothing when they started to hate each other. It was less than nothing after they tried to beat each other's faces in.

It's not like Steve changed Billy or whatever, either. Like the power of love. No. Actually, Hopper was the first person who made a difference in Billy's life.

It's late January, and snow is falling down in fat clumps. Billy's Camaro is tucked along the side of the road, just beyond a bend, so that it's half-hidden by a smattering of trees. He has some girl in the backseat. He's confident enough that her name is Kelly to breathe it into her ear as his hand skims up her thigh. She's insecure enough that she doesn't tell him it's actually Carrie as she unbuttons his jeans.

The windows are getting steamy and it's dark. Kelly-Carrie-Whoever puts too much of her tongue in Billy's mouth, and that's fine. It doesn't matter. Billy closes his eyes, and nibbles on her bottom lip. She gets squirmy about it, like she doesn't like it, but isn't bothered enough to complain and risk him stopping all together.

She puts one hand on his cheek while the other one slithers into his jeans. Even while she's jerking him off she tries to turn the kiss in to some romantic bullshit. Like what they're doing is something soft and sweet. Billy has no idea why anyone would seek him out if they wanted *soft*.

Still, yet another detail that doesn't fucking matter. He's just not in to it, so it's not like her prissy princess ideas about *love making* are really ruining anything. It's not like it's her fault that he closes his eyes and sees flat chests and sharp jaws. That his frustration builds at the feeling of small hands touching him, hands that are soft and smell like *lavender*. That he wants to hear a deeper voice and feel the burn from the scrape of stubble when he nuzzles her cheek, and hold muscles and strength and *hard not soft*.

Billy pushes not-Kelly off of him - not roughly, but definitely rudely. He zips and buttons his jeans and pops a cigarette between his lips. Whoever-the-fuck reaches for him, maybe to cuddle, maybe to get nasty again, but he waves her off.

He opens the car door and climbs out. He just starts walking. His date yells something after him as he disappears through the trees and the dark, but he doesn't hear it through the pounding in his ears.

So. Billy's gay, and he's not really handling it well. He could definitely be handling it worse. Lord knows there are bigger things he struggles with. He loses control over enough as it is. His daddy issues are all consuming, so his homosexuality will have to get in line. But. Well. Not having a complete break down doesn't mean he's coping.

Mostly, Billy's just tired. He does a lot of stupid shit to get himself hurt - at a certain point, even pain is better than the numbness that overcomes him sometimes. But that's not what he's trying to do now as he lays down in the snow. He doesn't think about how he forgot his jacket in the car, or how the temperature keeps dipping the darker it gets. He just wants a second to rest.

He's dimly aware of the sharp bite of cold against his cheek. He's less aware of just how many minutes tick by.

A car creeps slowly down the road. The headlights make Billy squint,

momentarily blinded, and he's not exactly in the middle of the street, but he does think for a moment *what if*.

The driver stops the car. Doesn't cut off the lights. Climbs out and pads over.

Hopper looms over Billy. He doesn't look angry or particularly concerned. Mostly just disgruntled. He nudges Billy's hip with the toe of his boot. "You drunk, kid?"

He's not, but he suddenly wishes he was. Maybe if he were he could get thrown in a cell to sober up. Maybe he wouldn't have to go home. "Fuck off."

Hopper just rolls his eyes and extends a hand. Billy stares at it. He thinks maybe he can still get in trouble enough to get booked. He can throw a few fists, be belligerent enough.

Billy takes the hand and his fingers - frozen and stiff - are slowly curling up into a fist when Hopper says, "Get in the car."

Apparently it's enough that he just doesn't like the kid. Billy's not really surprised- he'd gotten arrested for plenty of trivial things back in California. He never expected a small town shit hole to be any better. Tiny minds work in his favor, he guesses.

Billy sways a little on his feet. He holds his wrists together and out for cuffs, but Hopper just turns him by the shoulder and pushes him firmly towards the car. Billy scrambles into the back. He starts to recognize that his clothes have soaked through. It irritates him and rubs his skin raw.

Hopper turns on the heat full blast as Billy squirms. It's hotter than is probably comfortable for anyone who didn't take a snow nap. Billy refuses to recognize the kindness.

He presses his face against the window and watches the trees go by. The world feels like it's moving too slow. He's not so sure he's not drunk anymore. He's not even sure he's awake when, instead of pulling up to the station, Hopper pulls up to a cabin tucked away deep in the woods.

“Wha?” Billy stumbles over a garbled half-question, but the chief is already out of the car.

Billy’s door opens and there’s a hand grabbing at the shoulder of his shirt. He wants to smack it away, but he just stumbles along as he’s led to the cabin. It’s warm inside and nobody is yelling at him and he’s so tired. Hopper could be some old kook trying to cut him up and serve him for dinner, but at this point Billy wouldn’t even care.

No one’s getting murdered today, though. Instead, Billy is pushed down on to the couch. Hopper picks his feet up and lifts them up onto the couch, too. Then a blanket is thrown at his face, along with a low, gruff command of, “Sleep.”

So he does.

Steve likes to think it’s relatively hard to surprise him at this point. Discovering monsters will do that to you. He likes to think he has an open mind, and that he’s pretty good at rolling with the punches. Things come in to his life, and typically he learns to adjust around them.

What he’s not going to adjust to is Billy fucking Hargrove, who gave him actual punches to roll with.

He lets himself in to Hopper’s house - as all the kids do nowadays - trying to balance a heavy cardboard box in his hands. The lights are off and it’s quiet, which is odd for late on a Saturday morning. Usually, El would be finishing the last of the good cartoons, the television volume turned up too high.

“Hop?” Steve walks softer now, cautious of both disturbing deliberate peace or lingering monsters. “Joyce asked me to-“

El pokes her head out of her room, holding a finger over her lips. Steve is alarmed only for as long as it takes for El to point at the couch and bring his attention to the sleeping mass curled up there. At first he thinks it’s Hopper, conked out from an early morning patrol. Then the chief himself shuffles in from the kitchen area with a cup of

coffee, and Steve takes a closer look.

Steve drops the box in his hands. Luckily, there's nothing breakable in there. Even luckier, Billy is so dead asleep he doesn't even stir at the **thud**.

"Are you *insane*?" Steve hisses as he whips around to face Hopper.

Hopper shrugs, taking a long sip of his coffee. "Found him out in the snow last night around 2 AM. Figured I should bring him inside."

"Found- He's not a puppy!" Steve's raised voice makes Billy groan softly in his sleep and roll over on the couch.

"He's a teenager who could've died from hypothermia," Hopper drawls, less than impressed with Steve's hysterics. "I don't figure a kid who curls up outside wants to be brought back home. Besides, no one's called the station looking for him. That says enough."

Steve's teeth click as he shuts his mouth on his own response. He looks back down at Billy. It's easier to see his face now that he's turned. It's weird seeing him asleep, like it's something he shouldn't be allowed to witness. He doesn't look like a dick right now. Just like a normal seventeen-year-old boy. Kind of sweet almost.

But Steve knows that will change the second his eyes open.

He's aware that keeping people safe is in Hopper's job description. All people, not just the ones who aren't shitheads. Kids don't stop deserving help when their parents don't love them.

That doesn't make Steve forgive Billy any quicker - because really, why would it? - but it stops the trickle of betrayal that was creeping up his spine from Hopper's decision. It doesn't make him want to stick around too long, either.

"I should run," Steve says, voice back to a whisper. "I just came by to drop off that junk from Joyce."

"Sure, kid," Hopper smirks. "Take care."

Steve doesn't run from the house, but it's a near thing. He just doesn't

know if he's fleeing from the chance of a repeat performance of fists meeting his face, or from seeing Billy as an actual person. It's a lot easier to hate him when he's nobody.

When Billy wakes up, Eleven is standing over him with one of those shitty frozen waffles on a plate. He sits up, and the weird girl doesn't smile as she hands him the plate. He meets her eyes, though, and while he doesn't know her deal, he can tell they're both pretty fucked up.

So even though he doesn't smile either, he manages a soft, "Thank you."

2. Chapter 2

The fact that Eleven has to lay low for a while doesn't mean she's without a constant stream of visitors. Nowadays, far too many people are stacked on top of each other in Hopper's cabin. Their makeshift little family - brought together by trauma and secrets they can never share - makes a point of having regular dinners together. With only so many seats in the small space, they spread out on the floor and pass around bowls of mashed potatoes and peas, while Dustin and Lucas shout at each other over how much pie they're allowed to have.

Billy frequents the cabin now, too. It's not quite a secret, but it's not advertised, either. He tries to stay away as much as he can, but one or two times a week he shows up at the door, usually past midnight, with a split lip and a bad attitude. Hopper gives him space like Billy wants. Eleven watches TV with him until his mood fades into something slightly more agreeable. No one does a lot of talking those nights, and it suits all of them just fine.

It's late February when Billy and the family dinner collide.

Steve is sawing through a piece of chicken that's a little too overcooked, trying to ignore Jonathan and Nancy sharing private smiles across the room. All of the boys are talking too loud and too fast over each other about some new game at the arcade, and both El and Max watch with quiet amusement. They're too smart and too old for thirteen.

Joyce and Hopper are a little giddy, as they often are when they have everyone safe in one place, and reminiscing about the wild shit they did back in high school. Steve thinks they should just get back together already, but he's clearly an idiot when it comes to relationships, so he never actually says something.

The knock at the door is so unexpected that it startles everyone into silence. After all, with all of the important people in one place, who could be left to drop in?

Eleven's not as stunned and hops to her feet, almost happy about the

intrusion. She swings the door open, and there's Billy. Besides a line of dried blood crusted on his upper lip, his face doesn't look too bad, but he's holding his ribs like there's more than meets the eye. He glances over El's shoulder and sees everyone, and it's clear by the way his eyebrows shoot up his forehead that he wants to turn right back around and leave.

Steve wants him to leave, too. His mouth goes drier than the chicken on his plate. He doesn't want the dark cloud of Billy Hargrove to impede on the fragile happiness this family has fought for. He doesn't want Billy to be polite and nice, either. He doesn't want to get to know him or have to acknowledge him as a person with feelings and problems and potential.

Unfortunately for Billy and Steve, Eleven holds the door open wider. She doesn't ask him to come in, she expects him to.

Billy nods at her as he enters, muttering, "Weird Girl."

Eleven's mouth twitches in a smile before she replies even softer, "Bad Boy."

"What is he doing here?" Dustin asks in that whisper of his that is nothing close to a whisper.

"I don't know," Max answers a little stiffly, even as Lucas aggressively shushes them both with waving hands.

Hopper stands up and heads to the freezer. "Again?"

"Again," Billy shoots back, just shy of a snarl. Hopper tosses him an ice pack and he presses it to his side. "I'll be out of your hair soon, old man. When it warms up I can start sleeping in my car."

"Not so concerned about having you in my hair. I'm more bothered by how often your face gets rearranged."

Everyone stares as Eleven takes Billy's hand and tugs him over to where the group is scattered across the floor. "Sit." She plops down with her legs crossed next to Mike and pats the empty space on her other side. The space between her and Steve. "Eat."

Billy glances around the room, and whether he actually wants to stay or not is irrelevant. Mike's wary, torn between wanting to keep Eleven happy and hating Billy. Will's looking at him with big, nervous eyes. Dustin, Lucas, and Max are a row of glares, for all that they're not intimidating. Jonathan's eyes are glued to the floor and the look on Nancy's face is practically screaming *I fucking dare you*. Joyce and Hopper just look kind of sad.

Steve gapes, mouth hanging open like a goddamn fish. Billy scratches at the back of his neck, looking more embarrassed than anyone would have thought him capable of.

"I don't think I'm invited."

"Stay," Eleven says firmly. She looks around the room, shaming everyone. At least Billy's not the only one embarrassed anymore. "I want him to stay."

Joyce gives Billy a smile - one of those really kind ones that you can tell come straight from the most honest part of her soul. Billy's face tightens, and Steve can tell the kindness breaks him a little. "We've got too much food. If you don't help us eat it, I'll just have to lug it all back home."

Billy sits down, slow and careful, like everyone in the room is going to start roaring in laughter at the epic joke everyone but Billy was in on. When he crosses his legs his knee bumps Steve's. It's an accident, but he doesn't move it.

Personally, Steve wants to squirm away from the contact. He doesn't, because he's not one of the thirteen-year-olds in the room. But it's a close thing. Instead, he sniffs loudly and picks up the bowl of peas. He holds it out to Billy, refusing to look at him.

Billy takes the bowl, and he even mutters a rushed, "Thank you." Like he wasn't actually raised in a barn or something. Surprising.

If asked, Steve would admit passing the peas was a petty choice. Because, you know, nobody actually fucking likes peas. It's peas. Dustin puts maybe three on his plate out of obligation. Even Hopper doesn't finish the peas Joyce heaps on to his plate. Steve - who once

again isn't one of the thirteen-year-olds in the room- hides a few in his mashed potatoes, just to look polite and responsible, like a kid who cleans his plate.

Billy, though. Billy piles *five* spoonfuls of the peas on to his plate. This is followed by a mountain of mashed potatoes, three heaping flakes of what's supposed to be chicken, two dinner rolls, and the fattest piece of pie Steve has ever seen. Then he decimates every bite of food in front of him, down to the very last pea.

Joyce looks pleased as punch. Steve's glad she feels like someone really appreciates her cooking, but he's also hoping this doesn't mean he's going to be invited back.

To be fair to Billy - if that's possible - he doesn't say anything to anyone the whole meal. He's quiet enough that the tension coiled tight in everyone else falls away, and the natural flow of conversation picks up around him. He just sort of fades in to the scenery. He even falls off Steve's radar, despite the occasional knock of their knees.

Naively, Steve has the distant thought that maybe Billy really can stay a nobody to him. Some asshole he doesn't ever have to think about and avoid at every opportunity.

What an idiot.

Billy is outside smoking while the kids are being wrangled into cars. Mike and Nancy are piled in with the Byers, and Lucas, Max, and Dustin, as per usual, are being shipped off with Steve.

Steve doesn't mean to stare. He doesn't want to. Billy Hargrove is a psychopath, and whether one psychic little girl likes him or not, that's all he'll ever be. But for one second when he's here tucked away in the trees, and he thinks no one is looking, he looks peaceful.

But no. Billy is a nobody. He's not a person.

Steve doesn't look away fast enough, because Billy's eyes flick over and catch his. He doesn't smirk. He doesn't scowl. He loses the peace,

though. The wild look skitters back into his features, though it has a little bit of that broken quality that came from Joyce's smile.

"Harrington," he calls, as if he didn't already have his full attention.

Steve hates the way all of the muscles along his back tense. He drums on the top of his car. "Yeah?"

"I don't know how to apologize for shit."

Steve huffs a laugh, and the dry look he sends across the stretch of darkness is the first time anything halfway to *normal* clicks in to place between them. "I never would have guessed."

Billy does smirk now, as he tosses his cigarette to the ground and grinds it under his boot. "Workin' on it, though."

He turns and leaves Steve there staring after him like an idiot. Steve doesn't say something lame like *good luck* or *let me know when you figure it out*. Both occur to him, but both make him want to run in the other direction.

Mostly, he just stands there, still idiotic, until Dustin leans over to honk the horn.

Notes for the Chapter:

If I gave titles to each chapter, this one would be called "Peas and Thank You." I promise next time Steve and Billy will actually fucking interact.

Lemme know your thoughts!

3. Chapter 3

It's not even a week and half since the world's most awkward group dinner and Steve is crawling out of his skin. He gets this way, sometimes, when real life collides too hard with the happy little pocket life he has with his merry band of misfits. He has this wonderful group of people who think the world of him - they like him for who he is, bad grades and all. Every damn one of them are heroes, and they think he's a hero, too. Then he comes home and has his asshole dad riding his ass about colleges. As if he knows what Steve wants. As if he knows his own son at all.

So yeah, maybe Steve is too snappy that morning at Nancy. To be fair, she broke his heart and walked right into the arms of another guy. Great, she's happy. Steve wants to be happy for her, but he doesn't owe her a fake smile. She's the one that clawed at that shitty, surface, Cool Guy exterior until she ripped him open. She can deal with the real emotions she demanded.

He had been short with Dustin and Lucas earlier, too, on the way to dropping them off at the middle school. He'll definitely feel guilty for that later, even if Dustin shrugged it off as "Girl Trouble."

But it's not Girl Trouble. It's Steve Trouble. It's I Hate My Goddamn Life Trouble. My Parents Keep Shoving Me Toward A Direction In Life I Want Nothing To Do With And I'm About To Explode Trouble. Does Anyone On This Fucking Planet Really Know Me For Me - All Of Me, Completely? Trouble. Jesus fucking Christ.

Is he a hero or a fuck up? What happens when one family thinks he can do no wrong, and the other only sees every failure?

Steve feels like he's really spoiling for a fight, but he can't help it. He can't scream at his dad, and alienating the people who adore him doesn't take any of the edge off. He would love to go at it with Tommy right now.

It's just his luck that the world dumps Billy into his lap, instead.

It's Steve's lunch period, but he's spending it holed up in the library.

If he has to navigate other people right now he's going to get in serious trouble, so it's just as well that he's moping around somewhere no one is allowed to talk. He feels the heat at his side, though, a few seconds after the late bell rings out.

He looks up from the notebook he's decimating with doodles, and there he is. Billy fucking Hargrove, sitting too close to him by far. His legs are spread wide, invading Steve's space, and it's all the more annoying because he just keeps bouncing his knee. Steve's grip tightens on his pen and he waits. And waits. He's sure the dickhead is going to smirk or flick his tongue at him or whatever, because he lives for annoying him.

The goading doesn't come, though. Billy's got a book spread out on the table. An honest to God book that doesn't have illustrations or anything. Steve doesn't know if it's for a class or recreation, and he doesn't know which would surprise him more- Billy doing his homework or choosing to read. He seems to be into it, regardless. Very into it.

Steve wants to say something mean and uncalled for like *I didn't know you were literate*, but he settles for a tired, "Do you have to sit so close to me?"

Billy lifts his nose up out of his book, and he looks surprised. Genuinely surprised, like he really didn't know Steve was there at all. And really, where does he get off? Billy is the nobody. Billy's the one that Steve doesn't have time for. It's not supposed to be the other way around.

After the initial surprise wears off, that slimy smirk tweaks at Billy's lips. "What's up *your* ass, Harrington?"

"Nothing," he scowls. He scoots his chair farther away. "Mind your business."

"You're the one who got up in mine," Billy reminds him with a huffy laugh.

Well. He's not wrong.

“Whatever,” Steve mumbles. He puts another inch between their chairs. “You’re the one who practically sat on top of me.”

Billy hooks an ankle around the leg of Steve’s chair and jerks him back over. Their shoulders bump. “Word of advice?” His voice is low and dangerous, but it’s not cold like it used to be. That thing that El and Hopper and Joyce knocked loose hasn’t reasserted itself yet. “Don’t try and pick a fight with the guy who kicked your ass last time.”

“You’re the guy who got your ass handed to you by your little sister,” Steve drawls back, because he’s never been good at taking advice.

Steve half-braces for a punch, but the laugh that rolls out of Billy rocks him more. It’s not the ugly sneer of amusement he usually doles out. It’s something real. It’s one more step away from the nothingness Steve insists Billy needs to be.

“Yeah, maybe I am.” He leans in too close, and Steve hates the way that his stomach twists in excitement. “But you got beat by the guy who got his ass handed to him by his little sister. So, what does that say about you?”

Steve is, somehow, even more startled by his own laugh. “It probably says too much.”

Billy sprawls out in his chair, taking up even more of Steve’s space. His smile widens and Steve freezes for only one tenth of a second looking at him. His brain takes a snapshot of this moment- Billy being a normal, lighthearted guy. It’s an uncomfortably intimate moment, somehow, with them tucked away in some weird pocket of time and space at school.

His eyes are bright, and now that his shoulders are relaxed and loose Steve realizes how coiled tight the guy is all the time. The way he fills the space isn’t a jab right now like it usually is. No, it’s like he’s so at ease that he’s become Billy in liquid form, spilling out over the container that cooks him hot and fills him with rage. He trickles right out of his body and courses over Steve.

The shitty lights in the library cast a yellow tint over everyone’s skin,

but Billy still looks beautiful.

It bears repeating that, the first time Steve ever laid eyes on Billy, he thought he was attractive. He's not afraid of the way boys make him feel. He made it through the woods of that particular freak out a few years ago. Besides, boys never catch his attention as often as girls do. If he ever felt like he had to ignore it, he probably could.

He's afraid of the way that he's attracted to Billy, though. Afraid of the way that he's attracted *now*, because it's definitely different to the way he was attracted to him *before*.

Billy, to reiterate, is supposed to be **nothing**. Steve's seen him at his worst, and he's feared him and hated him.

Instead, Billy is confusing. Steve doesn't forgive him. He doesn't burn with resentment like he used to, but there's a hurt there, still. He doesn't even particularly like him. But Steve is curious. It's the same sensation of peeling off old, crusty paper from the wall to see what's underneath.

Steve used to be covered in some pretty shitty wallpaper himself. A peek under Billy's can't hurt, right?

Steve reaches out and kicks Billy's ankle. Billy's eyebrows twitch upward as he breathes a laugh. He tucks his tongue against his cheek, like he's trying to contain his smile. His cheeks go a little pink, and Steve has the ridiculous thought that, for a second, he looks like a little boy who's flushed and giddy from a long game of tag in the playground.

Billy almost cracks a joke about Steve flirting with him like some middle schooler. His mouth opens to say it and everything, but the words get stuck halfway up his throat. His barely concealed smile falls a little bit, but he makes his eyes stay soft. He doesn't *want* to be angry. Right here, right now, it doesn't feel like he has to be.

"Can I fucking help you?" Billy asks lightly, kicking Steve back.

"What are you reading?" Steve asks, even as he leans over and peers at the book with a comically exaggerated interest.

Billy rolls his eyes without any real heat. He flips his book shut and gestures at the cover with a flourish. “*Cujo*.”

“*Cujo*? Really?” Steve snorts, sliding the book over to thumb through some of the pages. “So it is just for fun? Unless English Lit got more wild since I took it.”

“Yeah, it’s for fun. Surprised?”

Steve grins, plopping the book back down on the table. It lands with a thud, loud enough that the librarian glares over disapprovingly. He hides a laugh behind a hand and sinks down in his chair to avoid additional ire. “Maybe I am surprised. Here I thought you were dominating kegs and scoring babes, and this whole time you’re really a sensitive intellectual type. Reading!”

Billy cackles, and sinks down in his seat, too, when the librarian’s glare moves to him. “You’re a fucking nerd, Harrington. Some people can manage to get laid *and* pick up a book.”

“I’m a nerd? I’m sitting in the library avoiding all the books, and you brought your own!”

Billy punches him on the shoulder. Not too hard, but Steve still plays it up with a grimace and a palm over the imaginary bruise. “It’s not a nerd book, though. It’s sick man, really.”

He’s excited, like when Dustin and the guys shout over the table about their latest Dungeons & Dragons campaign. Steve leans back in his chair, sprawling a little bit like he’s liquid, too. “What’s it about?”

“This big-ass dog that goes batshit crazy.”

Steve wrinkles his nose. “Evil dogs aren’t my thing.”

“No, I get it. ‘Cause who cares about some mutt doing bad shit, right? But it’s about people, too.” Billy shrugs, and he tilts his head and suddenly it’s almost too much to have all of his attention. “How people are shitty, too.”

It feels like Steve’s eaten a mouthful of sand. “I’ll have to check it out, then.”

Billy looks away quickly. He's even worse at handling the attention. "I'll lend it to you when I'm done, maybe."

Tommy strolls up behind them then, with that smarmy little smile. A part of Steve resents that the moment of normalcy breaks, but another part is grateful. It was all one step too far past normal, and the room was getting too stuffy with something too confusing.

"There you are, Hargrove." Tommy drapes an arm over Billy's shoulder, and that tense angry framework snaps right back into place. "Why're you slumming it with Steve, here?"

Steve knows Tommy's sneering at him, but he knows it will only annoy him more if he's ignored. He goes back to his pathetic doodles.

Billy jabs an elbow back into Tommy's ribs, but the guy just laughs. "Why're you looking for me?"

"Carol scored some weed from this guy from Chicago. We're gonna go smoke it behind the dumpsters. You in?"

Billy stands, never really acknowledging Tommy. He collects his things, and the smile he gives Steve now is one of those not quite right ones. "Try not to miss me," he taunts, hip-checking Steve's chair.

He stalks away with Tommy, and Steve exhales a heavy breath. He's so stupid. Being friendly with the guy? He should've stuck to the nothingness.

Now all he's gonna do is want to help the dickhead.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much to everyone who left the incredibly sweet comments! Your thoughts keep my ass in gear!

4. Chapter 4

Steve's not proud of it, but the next day at school his eyes scan the hallways for Billy between every period. He doesn't see him until the last bell of the day rings, and all of the other students are practically running for the door. He doesn't know what to do now that he's found him, either.

If Steve feels off balance from their time together yesterday, then he figures Billy "Emotionally Stunted and Volatile" Hargrove must feel a thousand times weirder. Billy on an off day seems especially dangerous.

Still, his eyes catch Billy's, and he can't pretend they don't. He offers an awkward half-smile, and Billy just jerks his chin up in acknowledgement. Steve opens his locker and hides behind his door then, because what was he expecting? Billy's never going to be the type to skip over and ask about anyone's day, or bounce fluffy banter back and forth. Billy doesn't have friends, he has distractions.

And that's fine. Really. Because Steve is very fucking sure he doesn't want to be his friend, anyway. Fuck him.

Steve gets jostled out of his spiraling thoughts by a sharp smack to his ass. He jerks and whirls around just in time to see Billy breeze past him. Billy's glancing over his shoulder, a wild smirk splitting his lips. "Better watch your ass, Harrington."

It doesn't have the edge of the many threats Billy's hurled his way. It's a little different than the easy, smooth drawl of their unlikely camaraderie in the library, too.

"Huh," Steve says out loud, still staring off down the hall, even though Billy is long gone.

Really, this interaction has to mean one of four things. Billy could be one of those weird sports guys who bonds with ass smacking. It could be that ass smacking is a popular form of greeting in California. It's also a possibility, and not at all an unlikely one, that Billy didn't realize how gay that would be before he did it... Or Billy is into

dudes.

It's something to investigate. Steve has always been weak to his curiosity about people. It's how he ended up falling in love with Nancy, after all.

So, Billy didn't realize how gay that would be before he did it. He practically runs to his car, hand still tingling from the force of palm meets-

Anyway, he doesn't want to think about it. It was stupid.

He slams the driver's side door shut and immediately wedges a cigarette between his lips. He needs to pick up Max, but he needs to get himself together first. All day he's felt off-kilter. He saw Harrington's eyes flicking over clumps of students all day as they dragged their feet down the halls. He wondered if he was looking for him. Hoped.

Billy spent all day thinking about what he might say if they ran into each other. He doesn't think a spew of word vomit along the lines of *You listened and gave a shit and also I think you're hot and I like dick so what does this all add up to please tell me I really don't know* would've worked.

Not that spanking him panned out much better.

The corner of Billy's lips curl upward as he flicks open his lighter. The shocked little face Harrington had made was gold.

Maybe Steve didn't think something like that was weird at all. Maybe Billy can actually relax and let loose around someone. It's not fucking likely, because Steve is an uptight pretty boy who can only chill, like, when the planets align. But when he does drop the uppity bitch act, Billy really likes the guy.

As friends or some shit. That's all.

Over the next three days, Steve does some observing. It's not a hardship to stare at Billy in any circumstance, but sniffing out clues makes things all the more thrilling. It's a silly obsession to pass the time, but Steve is basically consumed by it.

He catalogues the way Billy walks down the hallway, and with who.

There's this girl, Monica, who most of the guys at school go wild for. She's got big hair and even bigger breasts, and Billy swaggers through the building with his hand curved around her ass. Occasionally she lifts up on her toes and kisses him, and he kisses back with enthusiasm, but it looks like someone's twisting a knife in his gut. Steve doesn't think there's supposed to be a furrow in someone's brow when they're hooking up with a self-proclaimed It Girl.

There's this guy, Brady, and he's an idiot if Steve ever saw one, but he's some hotshot football player. As per the natural order of things, Brady and Billy don't really interact, but as they pass in opposite directions Steve sees Billy's eyes admire the seat of his jeans. It's not as casual as it probably should have been- it's too long and too hot, like Billy is a man starved.

Steve isn't jealous, but that night he goes home and stands in front of the mirror and wonders if his own jeans suit him well enough.

He catalogues the way he chews on his lip, too. How often he swipes his tongue out. It's distracting, but not as distracting as the way Billy stares at other boys' mouths. Brady's. Tommy's, even. Steve's. And Steve would think he's making up the frequency of Billy's attention on him if it weren't for the half-guilty, half-panicked darting of Billy's eyes after every glance at his lips.

Steve has a running list of all the ways Billy is different with him, too. When he claps a hand on his shoulder, his palm lingers behind an extra second and a half. He laughs a little louder at Steve's jokes, and Steve knows he's not really all that funny. When Steve says anything at all, Billy's gaze doesn't waver. Not once. He barely blinks.

It's a little unsettling, to see this thing growing. Billy Hargrove has a crush on him. It's odd to be able to attribute that feeling to someone like Billy, and to be so sure of it. Still, even when Nancy- sweet, surprising, wonderful Nancy- took a liking to him it hadn't even been this obvious.

Billy doesn't actually tremble when Steve is around, but the intensity in his eyes makes Steve think that maybe his insides do. That he's going to start shaking so hard from the inside out that he's going to slip right out of his skin. And go where? Steve doesn't know.

And it's hot. Steve's not really complaining. Plenty of girls have had crushes on him. A few boys that would never own up to it. He's even liked plenty back. Attention is rarely a bother. He might even consider fooling around a little, if it were anyone else inside such a pretty package.

But there's something in Steve's gut telling him he's been playing a little too loose with someone a little too wild. He knows that the heat coming off of Billy in waves isn't just attraction. There's rage buried there too, and it's wrapped up and tangled in every longing look. It's all just a little too complicated.

Steve is ready to cut his losses and run from it all when Nancy corners him before first period. She pops right out of a crowd of loud, squawky freshmen and plants herself in front of him. She pins him with wide, overly earnest eyes. If he cared about being late for History, he'd be antsy.

"Is everything okay with you, Steve?" She asks it with real concern, but it's still a little cautious. Their split was mostly amicable, but Steve would be lying if he said both his pride and his heart weren't shattered into a million pieces. They still care about each other, in a way that's no longer definable, but it feels tenuous. He can't imagine it'll settle into something comfortable for a very long time.

"Why wouldn't it be?" His eyes stay trained to the left of her. It's too hard to meet her gaze directly.

Nancy sighs and readjusts her textbooks in her grip. Her books always look too big in her arms. "You and Billy Hargrove... I heard

that you guys are friends or something now?”

“You *heard?*” Let me guess, your source was Jonathan?” He’d caught the other boy staring yesterday as Steve walked with Billy to the parking lot. Billy was talking more about the book he’s been reading, and Steve heckled him all the way, earning those too loud laughs. Jonathan had looked both confused and concerned, and Steve wasn’t interested in dealing with either reaction. From him or Nancy.

Nancy purses her lips. “Does it matter? I don’t trust him, Steve. I don’t trust him with *you*.”

“You don’t know him,” he shoots back, and really, the last thing he ever thought he’d do was defend the guy.

“And you do?” She reaches out to rest a hand on his elbow. “I don’t care what his deal is, he’s a bully. You’re too nice to fall back into that bullshit.”

Steve doesn’t rip away from her touch, but he wants to. He takes a step back from her instead, and the look on her face says that it stings just as much. “Right. I forgot. You’re an expert on bullshit.”

“Steve-”

He doesn’t wait around to hear her rebuttal. He stalks down the hall to stand by Billy’s locker. Steve knows he’ll be there, because he’s always a little late to the first class of the day. Billy has Chemistry, and Billy *hates* Chemistry.

Steve leans his shoulder against the lockers as Billy stuffs his jacket inside his own. Billy swipes his tongue over his bottom lip and Steve has to resist a smile, even though his veins are pumping with sharp, hot annoyance.

“Hey Hargrove, you going to come to the group dinner at Hopper’s tonight?”

Billy blinks slowly. “I wasn’t invited.”

Steve huffs a laugh. “Well, you are now.”

Billy doesn't know if he's really supposed to show up. Sure, Steve invited him, but Billy gets the feeling that Steve can be an impulsive brat sometimes. If he imposes on that weird-ass family dinner, more people would be pissed off than happy to see him.

It's one thing to crash on a couch a couple of times a week. It's another thing all together to start to spend time with these people. The lure of this big group of people who care so much about each other is tempting. The Byers lady, she has this chaos to her that reminds Billy a little of how his own mom used to be. And the cop, he never looks at Billy like he's a fuck up. He looks at him like they're cut out of the same cloth- two guys who are a little too aware of how shit the world can be, and a little too unstable to deal with it all. El is kind of like his best friend, and it's fucked up and weird, but they just get each other without having to say a lot. Billy's always having to alter little parts of himself to fit who he's with, but when he's hanging out on the couch with El he can just be.

And then there's Steve. Steve makes Billy feel the same way a bottle of whiskey does- all burning as he takes it in, and then a burst of warmth that pools in his stomach and curls all the way down to his toes. He makes Billy nervous in all the best ways. He makes him want to be a little bit brighter- happier- and a little more interesting, so he can keep Steve's attention. Steve makes Billy remember that maybe not everyone is out to get him. Maybe not everyone is a disappointment.

So Billy drives Max to the cabin, and when she trudges inside he spends only five minutes debating before following after. He itches for a cigarette, but he wants to be inside too badly to waste the time. He's too eager and he's dressed a little extra nice, but he's sure no one will really notice.

He steps into the small living room with more confidence than he feels. Steve's eyes do a quick inventory of him from head to toe, and okay, maybe *someone* noticed he's dressed nicer. Billy turns away from him before he can do something ridiculous like blush, and he almost runs in to El as she bounds out of the kitchen area.

He grins and reaches out to ruffle her short hair. "Watch it, Weird Girl."

Her lips twist to the side in a smile and she lightly nudges the side of Billy's boot with her toe. "Then move it, Bad Boy."

The Wheeler chick is glaring daggers at him, but he doesn't pay it much attention, because Steve is catching his gaze again with a wave. "I saved a seat for you, Hargrove. It wasn't easy. Better sit your ass down before Dustin tries and steals it again."

He takes the spot on the floor next to Steve, and besides the fact that the dinner of choice this time is hamburgers that Hopper threw together, there's not much of a difference from the last time. Not much of a difference except the press of Steve's knee against his is firmer. And Steve talks to him, animated and happy.

Really, as far as Billy is concerned, the room might as well be empty besides the two of them. He's such a fucking goner. Maybe Steve knows that, maybe he doesn't. Maybe he's being toyed with, but this... Billy does okay ignoring the way he aches sometimes to touch another boy. Those kinds of urges he's fine with satisfying in the shower or alone in his room with his eyes closed, or even sometimes with a quiet enough girl and a big enough imagination.

But feelings... Billy doesn't have those for people a lot. They're a lot harder to ignore. He can't douse himself in ice water and make those go away. They make him panic, and panicking makes him angry, and nobody likes Billy when he's angry. Especially Billy.

He feels a little too caged in by too many people in too small of a room, sharing space with his big thoughts. Once he's cleared most of his plate he jumps to his feet. Max gives him an antsy look, like she's worried he's going to make them cut out early. Billy waves her off. "I'm just going out for a smoke."

Billy's struggling with his lighter when Steve pads out of the cabin to stand beside him. Him being there doesn't help Billy at all. It doesn't pull him a step away from the ledge. It feels like a kick in the head, and Billy's not exaggerating when he says that, because he knows all too well what that feels like.

“Harrington,” he huffs, and it’s short and gruff, but it also sounds a little bit like he’s begging. Begging for what? For Steve to fuck off back inside? For Steve to fuck off all together? For Steve to find the secret words that will make Billy stop feeling like an angry shit all the time? Who knows.

Steve doesn’t do any of that, though. He just pulls out his own lighter and holds the flame up to the end of Billy’s cigarette. “El made me come check on you.”

Billy snorts and takes a long drag. “That kid. She’s something.”

“They all are.” Steve wiggles his fingers for the cigarette, and Billy hands it over. “So. Something bothering you?”

Billy shrugs. Steve waits him out. It’s the waiting that strikes Billy. No one ever has any patience for him. Really, why should they? But anger is what comes quick to Billy, the rest of it takes time. If Steve is willing to give him that time, Billy wants to give back something more than the rage that suffocates him from the inside out.

“Your face,” he mutters, and Steve scrunches up his nose.

“You’re bothered by my face?”

Billy can’t help but laugh, because it’s not untrue, in a roundabout sort of way. “No. I shouldn’t have done what I did to your face. Fuck it up and shit, I mean.”

Steve stares at him for a long while. He passes the cigarette back and the smallest of smiles stretches over his mouth. “That’s still not really an apology, you know.”

Billy groans, tipping his head back. “I know. Jesus. I’m still working on it, Harrington. Just wanted to give you something in the meantime.”

A loud peal of laughter rolls out from inside of the cabin, and it startles Billy. It distracts him. He looks over toward the door, but Steve isn’t distracted. Steve steps closer, crowding Billy against the porch railing.

Gravity feels like a myth, and if Billy didn't have a hand wrapped around the railing he's sure he would float away. The seconds are endless in the small space that stretches between them.

Then Steve leans in and he kisses him. It's a cautious, barely there brush of their lips, but to Billy, it's like stars exploding and galaxies expanding. It's like Billy has gone through his whole life with a pile of rocks stacked on his chest, and Steve is the first person who ever thought to remove them.

Billy learns how to breathe for the very first time with his lips grazing Steve's.

It's nothing more than that- a careful and hesitant introduction to something that could be more. Neither of them push for a second kiss. Neither of them talk about it. Steve goes inside and Billy stays on the porch, burning to ash like his cigarette.

Later, Billy drives Max home before doubling back to the cabin. He doesn't want to risk his night turning sour by going home to Neil and his bullshit. One night of respite turns into two, though. After that, three.

In the end, Billy doesn't return home for nine days straight.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter wasn't supposed to exist. It was supposed to be a paragraph in the next chapter, but then it just kept going and going, so there it is. Your comments are always lovely, and I appreciate them so, so much! Please throw some more at me so I feel obligated to keep writing while I'm visiting my parents.

5. Chapter 5

Nine days. For nine days Billy and Steve dance around each other. They don't talk about the kiss, and they don't talk at all. Steve keeps his distance because he knows he made an impulsive, stupid mistake. Billy keeps his distance because that kiss was the first time he ever felt *right*. They're both scared shitless.

But if either of them knew how much could go wrong after nine days, maybe things would have been different.

Billy has been living in a fantasy world, and he's not fucking sorry. He deserves a vacation from reality. He's a miserable shit, because for as long as he can remember he's been pretending to be something he's not. The only person who has ever scared him more than his shit bag dad is the person that Billy really is.

And that person is someone that Steve Harrington appears to maybe like a little bit.

So, yeah. Billy hasn't gone home. Maybe he's a coward for running away, but if he's not running from Neil, then he's running from the truth, and he's really tired of being dishonest. So for nine blissful days he pretends that he lives in a cabin in the woods. He pretends that his father is a rough around the edges cop, and he has a little sister who watches cartoons and listens to music too loud with him.

He pretends that kissing Steve was normal. They do it all the time. And more. They do so much more. Sure, he wants to bring that fantasy out of his head and corner Steve in the bathroom and find out what it's like to *really* kiss him- to kiss him with tongue and teeth and wandering hands. Billy doesn't trust Steve not to break the illusion, though. So he avoids him altogether, instead.

He's riding a fucking high, and he doesn't even need drugs to do it. It's like he's entered an alternate dimension. He finishes all his homework, eats three healthy meals a day, and he hasn't even

punched anybody in the face.

Then, on the tenth day, Max is waiting for him in the high school parking lot. Billy doesn't see her at first. He's busy fussing with his hair as he climbs out of the Camaro. He slams the door shut, and then there's another slam.

Max has her skateboard gripped firmly between her hands. She swings it down a second time on the hood of Billy's car.

"What do you think you're doing, you little asshole!" Billy tears the board out of her hands and chucks it across the lot. The rage that had subdued little by little flares back full force. He sees spots he's so angry.

His fingers curl into tight fists and his muscles coil at the ready. He looks down at Max and... He stops. The look in Max's eyes mirrors his exactly, and he has a pretty good idea of what that means.

Billy doesn't hit Max, but Max hits Billy. It's a punch to the chest, and it's harder than he thought it would be. She puts all she has in to it, and swings again and again. Billy lets it happen for a while. Feels every blow to his chest tear down a piece of the mirage he built around himself.

When everything has shattered to a pile of shit at his feet, he holds his hands up. She doesn't catch the hint and aims for his stomach and arms, instead.

"Max," Billy commands, softly at first. "*Max.*" Nothing. He grabs her by the shoulders and shakes her lightly. "Maxine! What the fuck?"

Tears spill hot down her cheeks, and people are staring. Steve is staring. Billy prays to all the gods he doesn't believe in that they're left alone. The embarrassment of it all twists his own anger tighter, but he takes a deep breath and gives her another shake to get her talking.

"Fuck you!" She screams in his face, twisting out of his grip. She kicks him in the shin, and Billy has to clench his jaw to hold back the urge to shove her down onto the pavement. "You're all the things he

says you are! You're a selfish and irresponsible piece of shit!"

She rears back to punch him again, but Billy grabs her wrists tightly in his hands. He leans in close, staring her hard in the eye. "Did he hit you?"

Max scowls and tries to wriggle out of his grip, but he's using too much of his strength this time. She deflates, and her lip wobbles a little bit. "No. He hit my mom."

Billy nods sharply and points to the skateboard that's rolled away. "Collect your shit," he orders, dangerous and low, even though he's the one who's scared out of his mind now. "Go to school. Afterwards- *Right afterwards*- I'll pick you up. We'll both go home."

For a very long time, Max doesn't say anything. She's not entirely thankful. She's not entirely sorry. She doesn't entirely hate him, either. She maybe understands him a little better, but she never wants to, completely. There's too much she wants to say, too much she shouldn't, and too much she can't.

Max nods and shuffles over to her skateboard. She picks it up and doesn't even look back at him before she starts toward the middle school.

Billy straightens his shirt and jacket. He strides inside the high school like nothing ever happened. Steve, the fucking moron that he is, follows after him, hot on his heels.

"What the hell was that about? Is Max okay?" Billy ignores him, like he's nothing more than a gnat. Steve grabs him by the jacket and whips him around. "Hargrove! I'm talking to you!"

Billy pushes him hard by the shoulders, and the lockers echo as Steve's back slams against them. He gets up close in his face, seething. "And I'm ignoring you. Catch a hint, Pretty Boy."

Steve's brow furrows, and he looks confused. He's not mad, which is infuriating. Billy can handle mad. He thrives off of mad. "Hey man, don't be a dick, okay? Just tell me what's going on."

"Fuck. Off." Billy spits. He wants to tear him in half for making him

think for even one second that anything in his life could be okay. He moves to take a step back, but Steve digs his fingers into his shoulders. "Let go of me, Harrington, or you're gonna need a plastic surgeon to fix your face this time."

Steve doesn't let go. "I'm not interested in another pissing contest. I just want answers. Max. Is she okay?"

Billy bats Steve's grip away. He takes a long step away from him. He's not in control enough to know what he'll do if he doesn't. "The brat is fine," he growls, and that's what makes him the angriest.

Of course Steve is only being a persistent twat because of *Max*. Why would he give a shit about Billy in this situation? Why would anybody? Billy is nothing, and he knows it.

He storms down the hall, rolling his shoulders to force some of his tension away. Steve lets him go without another question.

Steve wouldn't say that he's *worried*. He's intrigued, maybe. Intrigued with a side of caution. And honestly, it took a lot of patience on Steve's part to get Billy to be a little less of a psychotic dickhead, so back sliding like this is really daunting. That's all.

He certainly doesn't think about it the whole rest of the day. Why would he? He has bigger things to worry about, like a Calculus test, and what looks sort of like mold on his hotdog bun at lunch, and a group of junior girls whispering too loud as they trade ridiculous stories about why Steve and Nancy broke up.

There's no time at all for him to think about some asshole whose mood changes on the drop of a dime. There's no way he wonders if maybe he did something wrong. If he should've just talked to the guy after their kiss. If he shouldn't have kissed him at all. If he should have kissed him longer.

When all is said and done, he barely even has the time to lie to himself about how little he's thinking about Billy Hargrove. His group of barely pubescent idiots find him in the parking lot after school,

and despite the fact that his heart jolts and the thought that maybe something happened involving Billy, they talk so fast that Steve can barely get any questions in.

“Steve!” Dustin bellows, colliding into him and half-climbing up his side. “Steve! We just got a radio from Eleven!”

“It’s the demodogs!” Lucas wails, even as he tries to peel Dustin off of Steve.

Mike shushes them both frantically, and Will whispers so quickly that Steve can barely understand him. “They’re back. Or they never left. I don’t know. But Eleven said she had a dream there were five of them lurking around in the woods.”

“The gate’s still closed,” Mike clarifies, seeing how pale Steve’s gone. “But I think maybe a few of them got trapped on the wrong side.”

“Or there were more slug babies hiding in trash cans like Dart.” Even in their panic, Dustin and Lucas start shoving each other by the shoulders. “We have to find them right?”

“Right,” Lucas echoes, getting in a particularly good shove that has Dustin grimacing. “We gotta hunt them.”

Steve feels a little dizzy. He leans on his car for support. “Alright guys, slow down, just... Let’s not get worked up if... I mean, it was a dream, right? Even El has to have dreams that are just dreams sometimes.”

Mike looks back at him like he’s stupid, and really, he’s never looked more like Nancy. “You really want to take that chance?”

“Alright, fine. But we can’t go running off on our own again. We need to tell everyone else. Joyce and Hop, Nancy and Jonathan, and- And where’s Max? Isn’t she supposed to be with you shitheads?”

“She had to go right after classes ended,” Lucas shrugs, but he looks like he’s vibrating with worry. “She wouldn’t say why.”

Steve clamps a hand down on his shoulder, trying to be a comforting influence even though his legs are quickly turning to jelly. “Okay. It’s

okay. We're all going to meet at the cabin, alright? You four track down Jonathan and Nancy and have them drive you over to Hop's. I'll go pick up Max."

"What if her brother tries to kill you again?" Dustin screeches, slapping Steve's arm an unnecessary amount.

"Cut it out." Steve shrugs him away. "Billy's not killing anybody. But I'll be sneaky. A quick in and out mission. No one will even notice she's left."

A quick in and out mission. Right. Steve didn't realize how stupid it would be to try and kidnap a thirteen-year-old girl until he was hiding in the bushes out front of her house. He doesn't know if he's more afraid of a monster creeping up behind him from the trees, or getting the cops called on him and having to explain why he's lurking outside of a little girl's window.

Steve takes a deep breath and runs as quietly as he can to the side of the house. He toes up to the window by the woodpile and peers in. There she is, sitting on her bed scribbling away at her homework as music blares too loud from her speakers. He lets some of his tension go. At least Lucas was accurate with the location. God only knows what would have happened if he peeked up and came eye to eye with her mother. Or worse, Billy.

He knocks urgently on her window pane, but she doesn't hear it. Cursing under his breath, he knocks a little harder.

Max's head jerks up, and she's all panic. She scrambles off her bed and turns her music down a notch before throwing open her window. "Steve? What are you doing? You can't be here."

"I know, it's weird. But you need to come with me. We've got a problem."

"I *can't*," she hisses, looking back over her shoulder.

Steve's paranoia makes him peer over her shoulder, too, but the door

to her room is still firmly shut. “Look, we think the demodogs might be back. We’re gathering at Hop’s to work out a plan.”

Max glances back at the door, and Steve would swear she’s more nervous about what’s going on on the other side than monsters from an alternate dimension. There’s a loud thump against the door. Max winces and she moves back over to turn the volume of her music back up.

“What’s going on?” Steve asks, and for a second he thinks it’s going to be as much of a pain in the ass to get any answers out of her as it was to get answers from Billy.

Her jaw unclenches though, and she leans halfway out of the window and lowers her voice to a whisper. “It’s Billy. He’s fighting with his dad.”

“Fighting...?” There’s another thump, and then what sounds like the clatter of a chair before a shatter of glass. Steve has a feeling Billy doesn’t fight with his dad like he fights with his own.

Max shrugs, looking guiltier than she has any reason to be. “It’s kind of a one-sided fight.”

Steve’s stomach drops to his toes. He tosses his car keys at Max, and she catches them easily. “My car is parked down a few blocks. Get in the back and wait for me.”

“Steve,” she warns, and really, he doesn’t need a thirteen-year-old’s advice to know that he’s stupid.

“Go,” he orders more firmly.

Max has barely climbed out of her room before Steve starts for the front door. He has no fucking idea what he’s doing, but he can’t stop himself. Ever since he stumbled into the middle of a monster trap at the Byers’ house and picked up that bat for the first time, he hasn’t been able to stop doing reckless shit to help people. Somehow, though, it seems a little easier to save someone from a monster than from their own parents.

He doesn’t let himself think for another second before he’s banging

on the front door. He can hear the scuffle inside pause, and murmured voices. Then the door is swinging open and a man is standing in front of him- a man that looks perfectly normal and composed.

But Steve looks over his shoulder and catches a glimpse of Billy leaning against a wall for support. His clothes and hair are disheveled. His lip is split open and there's a red spot blooming over his cheek bone.

Steve swallows and shouts the first thing that comes to mind with as much enthusiasm as he can muster. "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your lord and savior?"

The too normal man at the door narrows his eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Jesus is good! Jesus is great. Jesus... Jesus *saves*." He makes brief eye contact with Billy before making a sweeping gesture towards the general direction of Max's room. "Let Jesus in through the... The window of salvation!"

"The window of salvation?"

"Yes! *The window*." He can see Billy arch a brow before quietly sneaking off toward Max's room. His father starts to look over his shoulder at the movement, but Steve claps his hands loudly, regaining his attention. "Jesus! He wants you to go to church. And I want you to go to church. I want you... To go to church with me!"

Mr. Hargrove gives him a hard, flat stare before announcing, "I'm shutting the door now."

"Wait!" The door slams loudly in his face. His heart pounds, and he trips over himself to get back to the side of the house, hoping and praying that he stalled long enough for Billy to make an exit. Billy's stumbling down off of the woodpile when he gets there, clutching his ribs as he spits a string of curses. He has to grip the window sill to keep from toppling over, and when he looks up it's with a wild glare. "What. The. Fuck? What do you think you're doing?"

“Help... Helping.”

The answer only seems to infuriate Billy more. He stalks over with none of his usual grace. “Helping? You think so?”

“I do,” Steve insists, standing taller as he regains some of his confidence. “It’s not like I could have just left you like that. Don’t be stupid.”

“Stupid?” Billy laughs, and it’s not a nice sound. “I’m not the one who’s stupid, Harrington. I deal with that shit all the time, and you think because you act like a moron one time to give me an out, you’re *helping*? My ass is only gonna get kicked eight times harder when I come crawling back. You think you’re some hero? You’re not. You can’t save me.”

It’s strange timing, but right now Steve feels closer to Billy than he’s ever felt to anyone. Here they are, one helpless kid to another, burning inside from how useless they are.

“You’re right,” Steve admits. “I can’t save you. I can’t. That doesn’t mean I have to just stand by.”

Billy looks sharply away from him, jaw going so rigid it looks like it might splinter and crack. “Stay out of my business.”

“No.”

He looks back at Steve with so much surprise that Steve would have laughed in any other situation. “No?”

“You heard me.” Steve props his hands up on his hips and takes a few more steps to obliterate the remaining distance between them. They’re centimeters apart and he looks Billy dead in the eye. “I won’t stay out of your business, ‘cause I give a shit. Yeah, for some reason, I give a shit about you. I don’t know if we’re two guys who beat the crap out of each other once. I don’t know if we’re friends. I don’t know if we’re anything else. But you’re getting in my car and you’re coming with me.”

Billy’s mouth falls open and he blinks. He takes a step backward and sniffs awkwardly. “...Fine.”

Steve smiles as his shoulders sag in relief. “Great. I would’ve dragged your ass, but you’re a little stronger than me.”

“Only a little?” Billy mumbles, trying to break the suffocating weight of the air around them with a smirk.

Steve snorts, patting him on the shoulder as they start down the block. “Okay, a lot. I’ll give you that one.” He stops for a second, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. “Uh, I should tell you... Max is in my car, and the place I’m taking you... It might actually be more dangerous than here.”

Billy shrugs, and there’s a light in his eyes that makes it hard for Steve to breathe. “I like danger.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Plot-wise, this has just really stopped cooperating. It’s taken on a life of its own and just kind of does what it wants, while vaguely and occasionally hitting the plot points I’ve planned on. So that’s fun. Thank you so much to everyone for the incredible comments I got on the last chapter. You guys really inspire me to keep cranking this out.

6. Chapter 6

For most of the drive, the car is unbearably silent. Billy keeps glancing at Max through the rearview mirror, and Max keeps glancing back. Steve doesn't know if a moment is happening between the two of them, so he stays quiet. For the most part. He shifts uncomfortably at every red light, and the rustling of his clothes is louder than he'd like it to be.

His endless fidgeting catches Billy's attention, and the younger boy cocks his head. "You gonna give me any sort of explanation for what you're about to drag me into?"

Max sucks in a sharp breath. "You can't!"

Billy arches a brow and drums his fingers on his thigh. He left his pack of cigarettes at home, and he'd kill for one. "Sorry, brat. Steve here obviously thought I was worth inviting into the club."

"If he's going to come with us, he deserves to know *something*," Steve half-mumbles. "Maybe not all of it. We probably wouldn't even have time for all of it, but—"

"Why would he even believe us?" Max leans forward between the seats, and it takes all that Steve has not to tell her to sit back and buckle up. "I didn't believe it until I saw it."

"He might not, but it's better to tell him and have him not believe it than have him see it and not know what it is."

Billy rolls his eyes, and Steve hates how attractive he thinks it is. "Hello," he singsongs. "You weirdos know I'm right here, right? Like, I can hear you talking about me?"

Max turns to face him fully and gives him a flat stare. "Monsters are real, asshole. And we're going to fight them."

His eyes narrow. His fingers drum faster. "Um. The fuck?"

Steve sighs and puts the car into park as they arrive. "Think Cujo, Billy. But with less of a face."

If the silence of the car brought Steve to his wits end, then the noise of the cabin is doing the very same to Billy. Everyone's shouting at once, and emotions are too high. Most of the kids keep sending suspicious glances his way, and Joyce will occasionally pat his shoulder, like she's adopted him into her brood of weirdos. Steve doesn't know what the fuck to do, and keeps shifting his weight on his feet as Nancy has an entire conversation with him with just her eyes.

"Look, El can't get a good enough read on the demodogs. It's like they come and they go. Like they're hiding." It's the taller kid, Mike or something. Billy can't decide if he's got major stones, or if he's just a pain in the ass. "Without some kind of coordinates we'll have to split up. The woods are just too big."

"We?" Hopper scoffs. "No. There's no *we*, kid. Everyone who's not an adult is going to stay right here where it's safe."

Billy snorts without meaning to. All eyes snap to him. He swallows thickly under the weight of their attention. "That's a load of shit, old man. I barely know what you freaks are talking about and I know there's no way you can be sure this place is any safer than out there."

"He's an asshole, but he's right," Dustin agrees.

"No," Hopper says firmly, sliding a determined gaze over all of them. "He's not right. A bunch of kids shouldn't be running around with weapons looking for trouble."

Steve crosses his arms over his chest, and Billy can see right through his bravado. It's cute, but it's a little sad. "I'm going with you and Joyce, then, right? I'm eighteen. I'm legally an adult. I can do this."

"Let's not have the legal adult conversation right now, Steve," Hopper sighs in exasperation. "Joyce and I are going, and everyone else is going to huddle together in this damn living room and be obedient children for once in their lives."

Billy arches a brow. "Yeah, obedience isn't really my thing."

“Me either.” El stalks forward to plant herself in front of Hopper. “I’m going. I have to go.”

“Look-“

“I *have* to. I’m the one who has the best chance at finding them. I’m the one who has the best chance of hurting them.”

Billy nudges Steve in the side, muttering low and lazy. “What exactly is her deal?”

“It’s complicated,” Steve smiles a crooked, nervous smile. “She’s... Special.”

“Whatever, man.” Billy shrugs as the cabin descends in to chaos again. The younger boys are all talking over each other to try and wear down Hop, and Billy gets antsy as El and Max start making glances toward the door, like they’re going to bolt for it. Jonathan is whispering heatedly with his mom, and Nancy and Steve look like a middle-aged suburban couple whose kid is two minutes past curfew.

The arguing stretches on and on and on, and Billy is about to flip his lid when Joyce takes a step back and shouts, “Enough!” She takes a shaky, calming breath. “Enough. Hop, the second we leave everyone behind you know they’re going to run off on their own. Let El and the older kids go if they want to. I’ll stay behind with the rest.” She gives the sullen middle schoolers an encouraging smile. “We’ll be the final line of defense, right? We all have an important role.”

Max bites her lip as Dustin, Lucas, Mike, and Will put on the most ridiculous pouts. It’s one thing to rope Steve into their plans, who they love but rarely listen to. Joyce is an immovable object, and they know it.

“Fine,” Hopper groans. “The six of us will go out and patrol for an hour. *One hour*. You hear me? We’ll pair up and bring a radio, so if we see any signs of trouble we can meet up.”

It’s like a fucking high school group project the way the next few seconds unfold. El grabs for Hopper’s hand, and Nancy and Jonathan wrap their arms around each other like someone is going to try and

pry them apart. Steve stares straight ahead, but it looks like he's about to shit his pants. Whether it's from the thought of facing monsters or spending time alone with the resident bad boy, Billy can't really tell.

But that's how they end up traipsing through the trees in more strained silence.

Well, Steve feels like it's strained. Billy kind of likes it. Talking is in his top three most hated things, right next to weather below fifty degrees and literally anything his dad ever does. So, Billy just twirls the axe he's armed with in his hands as Steve shuffles along at his side with a nail bat and a clunky flashlight, letting the patter of feet hypnotize him into a state of comfort.

Harrington just can't help himself, though. He's always desperate to fill quiet spaces. He gets nervous and jumpy otherwise. Long stretches without sound remind him of lurking monsters and the tension around the breakfast table between him and his parents.

"You're taking the whole monster thing oddly well," Steve murmurs, resisting the urge to aim the flashlight at Billy and get some comfort from his muscles and swagger and unbothered expression.

Billy shrugs, and he opens his mouth to brush him off, really, but something too real and too vulnerable pours out instead, like he doesn't even have control over his own tongue. "My mom was a fucking wildcat. She had claws, and didn't do so well when people tried to domesticate her. Bunch of people probably thought she was half-crazy, but she just loved stirring the shit and embracing her own chaos, you know? She was amazing."

He pauses, feeling a little stupid for saying anything in the first place. Steve keeps his big mouth shut, though, so he continues a little softer. "She loved me, but she hated being married. She hated being tethered to one place. And she had big ideas. A fuckin' crazy imagination. When I was a kid she'd throw my blankets over our heads and tell me to picture anything. Any place, any person, any thing. Told me to never settle for the things that were just right in front of my face. She said that there's always something more out there. Big things that have maybe never been discovered. Things no

one would ever believe.”

Billy breathes a small, bitter laugh, tipping his head back to look through the branches at the stars. “It didn’t take too long after she died for me to realize there was no reason for me to believe the extraordinary things out there were *good*.”

“Shit,” Steve croaks. “I... I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Neither was I.” Billy itches for a cigarette. Itches for Steve. “Whatever, though. I mean, I could die tonight, right?”

Steve’s heart beats double time in his chest. “You won’t.”

“But I could.”

“You *won’t*.” Steve stops walking, and Billy almost continues right on without him. The firmness in his voice halts him in his tracks, though.

He looks through the darkness at Steve and tries not to start shaking. “What, you gonna protect me, Pretty Boy?”

Steve’s lips twitch up in a smile. “Sure.”

“You some big fuckin’ hero?” Billy sneers, but there’s no real heat to it. No real heat anywhere besides what’s curling in his gut.

“I’m not trying to be.” This whatever it is they’re doing right now, it’s not at all what they should be doing. There are honest to God monsters hiding out in the woods somewhere and they’re... What? Flirting? Fighting? It’s always kind of hard to tell.

Steve gives in to his urges and turns the flashlight on Billy. He just has to see his face. He has to. It’s like he’s incapable of deciding what to do with the next handful of minutes, and Billy’s the only one who can give him any answers.

Billy huffs and hacks at a tree with his axe in agitation. It sinks into the trunk with a thunk and stays there. “What *are* you trying to be?”

“Hell if I know,” Steve shoots back with an almost manic desperation.

His fingers loosen around the grip of the bat and it slips through his hold to the ground. "How 'bout you?"

The flashlight casts shadows over Billy's face that look all the more ominous when his mouth splits open in a wicked grin. Steve feels like his intestines have organized a rebellion and tied themselves in to knots. "Someone who doesn't talk so fucking much."

Billy reaches out and smacks the flashlight out of Steve's hand. He grabs a fistful of Steve's shirt and hauls him forward. It's the exact opposite of their first kiss. Their mouths crash together so hard pain quakes through their teeth. There's a violence to it that doesn't carry rage, but desperation. It's not a particularly good kiss, but to Billy it feels like a necessary lifeline.

Steve pulls back, lips already puffing up and reddening. "Billy. Wait. Wait, man."

Rolling his eyes, Billy releases Steve's shirt. His hands curl into white-knuckled fists at his sides. "*What?* Second thoughts?"

"No, I just- Will you calm down? Everything doesn't have to be so fucking dire all the time." Steve pushes a hand through his hair and takes a deep breath. "I just... Have you done this before?"

He gets a flat look for his efforts. "Make out? I think so. I've been around with a bitch or two dozen."

It looks like Steve wants to stomp his feet, and Billy will be damned if it's not adorable. "I'm not talking about bi- *girls*. I'm trying to see if either of us know what the hell we're doing, okay?"

Billy looks away, tracing the shapes of trees in the darkness and trying too hard for casual. "It doesn't seem like kissing dudes is rocket science."

"So, no?" Steve smirks and toes closer so his chest presses along Billy's side. "I've only fooled around with two or three guys before."

"Well, is it two or is it three?" Steve Harrington's gotta be a bad influence, because Billy's sounding like a brat right now.

Steve doesn't mind. He bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling too wide. "I guess you'd make three."

Billy turns his face and tries to catch Steve's lips again, but Steve dodges the move. Billy hooks a finger in Steve's belt loop. "Is this some kind of hobby for you? Finding the most fucked up guy in school and bringing him to his knees? You take Tommy for a ride around the block, too?"

"Nah. Tommy's not really as pretty as you."

"Fuck you, I'm not pretty." Steve presses his face to Billy's shoulder to keep from laughing at him. "I'm not."

"Okay," Steve mutters placatingly. "Handsome?"

Billy shrugs him off. "Handsome is for boyfriends and hubbies. Lay off. You don't have to wine and dine me. We're just two guys blowing off some steam where we can get it, right?"

Steve arches a brow so high Billy's sure he's going to pull a muscle in his face. "Right, because everything about you is so convenient," Steve drawls. "It's okay to like guys like you like girls, you know."

"I don't," Billy says sharp and quick.

"It's not like I'm going to tell anyone. There are a lot more pressing secrets in the world than the range of Billy Hargrove's sexual preferences. So just cool it, okay? Denying it doesn't change--"

"I'm not denying anything," Billy cuts him off gruffly. "Okay? I don't like guys like I like girls. I... I don't like girls. Alright?"

Steve laughs, and it's clearly precisely the wrong thing to do. Billy's face clouds over and the electricity in the air flips from attraction to danger. "Hey, hey. I'm not laughing at you. Be gay all you want. Just... Why go out with so many girls, then?"

Billy grinds his teeth. "Enough with the feelings talk, okay Harrington? Are you going to put your tongue in my mouth, or what?"

Who could turn down that kind of invitation? Steve shoves Billy so he stumbles until his back hits a tree. He cups his strong jaw and kisses him deep. When he sucks on Billy's lower lip the other boy shudders, hands clinging to Steve's hips.

Billy feels like he's fucking flying. Why hasn't he been doing this his whole life, consequences be damned?

Steve sneaks a hand up into Billy's hair, tugging lightly to tip his head back for more leverage. He flicks his tongue past Billy's teeth. At this point, Billy would usually steal back control with nipping teeth and a sloppy tongue. With Steve, though, his jaw falls open wider as a low groan rolls up from his throat.

One of Steve's knees slip between Billy's legs. Both boys pant loudly into each other's mouths, exchanging ragged breaths. Billy presses closer to Steve, grinding his thigh. He shoves his hand into the back pocket of Steve's jeans and *squeezes*.

As Steve's teeth bump clumsily across Billy's bottom lip he stops abruptly. A tang of copper shocks his tongue. Billy's split lip has cracked open, a fresh vibrant red.

"Blood," Steve whispers, thin and numb. He'd been a fool not to think about it.

He tears himself away from Billy and fumbles in the dark, looking for the bat he abandoned on the ground. His elbow crashes against the discarded flashlight and it spins, dizzy blurs of light blinding them in the contrast of the night.

"Steve?" Billy hazards, cheeks burning with the potential of shame or embarrassment. "Did I-"

"Shut up." His fingers finally wrap around the bat and he rises up on shaky legs. "Billy, your axe."

Billy's breath catches in his throat and he turns to reach for the handle. Before his fingers can even graze the wood, a horrible unnatural shriek cuts through the quiet. A demodog launches at him from the side, and all Steve can do is scream.

The monster hangs in the air though, the petals of its face straining. Billy and Steve are frozen to the spot with fear. It feels like time has slowed down. Like if they blink the demodog will keep hurling forward and rip Billy to shreds. Instead, its body folds in half with a wet crunch. It thumps as it falls dead to the ground.

A light pours over them, and Billy and Steve snap their heads around to see Hopper and El. A small line of blood drips from El's nose, and Hopper just looks exasperated. He doesn't lower the flashlight, despite the boys squinting and recoiling from the brightness.

"Got a little distracted, huh?"

All of the hair on the back of Billy's neck stands up straight. "No. No. We were just-"

"I don't give a shit, kid." The flashlight finally aims toward the ground. "Just have better timing the next go around, maybe."

Billy struggles with the urge to vomit and Steve's shoulders come up to his ears. El just beams, pleased as punch. "Date?"

"No," Billy barks. He crosses his arms tightly over his chest and angles himself away from Steve. "Don't be ridiculous."

El only smiles wider. Hopper drops a hand on her shoulder. "Enough of that. Come on. Let's get the others on the radio and meet back up at the cabin to talk about these monsters."

Steve and Billy drag their feet as they follow after them. For a long while they stare determinedly ahead, until Billy can't take it. He sneaks a glance at Steve. Steve risks a glance back. The both of them trip over their feet a bit at the unexpected eye contact.

Steve is the first to smile, but he swears that the shy answering curl of Billy's lips is the most devastatingly gorgeous thing he's ever seen.

Notes for the Chapter:

I said fuck so much and the boys just kept talking and this chapter wouldn't quit. So I hope you like it. Your comments keep me going, even when I want to

set this on fire. Also, I'm on tumblr now! Find me at
BisexualGoblin.

7. Chapter 7

Everyone is agitated and on edge. No one knows anything solid about the demodog situation. El sees them sometimes when she closes her eyes, but they're there one second and gone the next, like a flickering TV. Joyce smokes more cigarettes than she can afford, and the party bickers even more than usual.

Everyone is agitated and on edge, but for Steve and Billy, it's for a completely different reason. Sure, the demodogs have Steve's nerves shot and Billy jerks awake a couple of nights from dreams of a close brush with death. But what really drives them nuts is the fact that they're not kissing every second of every day.

School is a lesson in torture. They pass each other in the halls, and they're so close- always so, so close- but they know they can't touch. They look, though, and that's almost worse.

Billy's gaze is heavy and hot as he rakes his eyes over Steve. Steve doesn't shy away from the challenge, and watches Billy watching him. When their eyes meet, they both shiver.

It was one thing for Billy to think about kissing Steve when it was just a fantasy, but having the memory of the taste of his lips is like a knife between the ribs. This whole thing can only lead to trouble for Billy- there's no other outcome than this fucking up his life- but he would drop to his knees right now and beg for more if it got Steve's hands on him again.

Steve's mouth slides into a smooth smirk, like he can see how weak Billy is for him. In response, something in Billy just *snaps*. He cuts across the space between them in the hallway and curls his hands around Steve's biceps. He presses him back hard against the row of lockers, and he knows it looks violent- must sound that way too with the echoing clang of metal- but it's all desperation.

Steve squirms a little. He arches ever so slightly towards Billy. From the corner of their eyes they see concerned whispers. Several students scurry past them faster. It must look like one hell of a fight is brewing, but hitting each other is the last thing they want to do right

now.

“Miss me?” Steve teases, his voice barely a whisper.

And Christ, it's only been three days since their moment alone in the woods, but yes. Yes. Billy misses him. They've talked a little, and stared, and passed stupid notes, but time together in front of all these people isn't really time together at all. It doesn't help that once the bell rings at the end of each day they both have middle schoolers to drag home, and Billy's dad has been keeping an eye on him like he's some princess locked away in a tower.

Billy clenches his jaw and lets Steve's question go unanswered. “Meet me at the quarry after the brats are home.”

“Your dad-”

“My dad can fuck off,” Billy growls. “If he's gonna give me shit, I might as well do something to deserve it.” He taps Steve's cheek with an open palm and sticks his tongue out between his teeth for good measure before he strides off down the hall.

With great determination, he ignores the butterflies in his stomach.

Billy is so keyed up on the drive from school that it takes all of his willpower not to drive the Camaro into a ditch. Max definitely notices, casting nervous glances his way. He tries to calm down, but his fingers keep clenching and unclenching around the steering wheel.

“When we get home I'm going to drop you off and cut out,” Billy mumbles, staring too intently at the road. They haven't quite learned how to talk to each other yet- there's no real solid ground between them. “I don't know how long I'll be. If Neil beats me home, don't try and cover for me. Just tell him you don't know where I went.”

Max furrows her brow, and Billy can't tell if she's concerned or angry. Though, knowing Max, it could be both. “You're gonna get yourself killed.”

Billy just shrugs. "Better for all of us then, right?"

Max's face goes slack and her jaw falls open in shock. Billy looks away from her. His foot presses heavier on the gas pedal.

He thinks for a moment about what would happen if he were hit so hard one day that he never woke up. Would Neil be satisfied that the stain of a fuck up son was wiped clean from his life and leave everyone else the fuck alone? Or would it be the same as when Billy disappeared to Hopper's for too long? Would he start breathing down Max's neck?

Billy has always found his life sort of... Pointless. Why was he born just to be slapped around and told who to be? Bad things tend to find Billy, wherever he goes. He's always just accepted that as shit luck. Maybe, though, that's what he's here for. He's a receptacle for all the bad so it can't touch anybody else.

His foot eases up on the gas. He's never actively wanted to die, but for the first time, right now, he wants to be alive. He wants to keep Neil from ruining anything else. And he wants to hold on to the few good things that have started to find him.

"I'll be fine," Billy says, finally, when he pulls up out front of the house.

"Billy..." Max turns her whole body to face him. She doesn't really know the right words to say what she needs to say. "The other day, when I was yelling at you..."

He shakes his head. "How about you don't try to apologize, and I don't try to apologize, but we both know we mean it, 'kay?"

Max crosses her arms and huffs. "Fine. That works. If you start owning up to the shit you've done wrong, I'll try and understand the shit that isn't your fault."

Billy can't help but smirk. She's pretty okay, that one. "Deal."

He holds out his hand, and she claps hers against it. She holds on for a moment, giving his fingers a squeeze. "I hope wherever you're going is worth it, you psycho."

Billy waggles his brow. "Oh, you know it."

Max rolls her eyes and pulls her hand away. "Disgusting," she mutters, climbing out of the car and shutting the door gently behind her. She levels one last grossed out look at Billy before running inside.

He laughs to himself as he tucks a cigarette between his lips, doing his best to pretend the butterflies haven't come back as he starts toward the quarry.

Billy gets there first, and it's a little over twenty minutes before he has company. He's leaning against the hood of his car when the Beemer's headlights wash over him. He strikes a bit of a pose, pulling his shoulders back to show off more of his chest in his half-open button down. Bringing his cigarette to his lips, he tips his head back to entice Steve with the slope of his neck. He lets the smoke curl out from his mouth, like a wisp of a spell to draw Steve in.

"Been waiting long?" Steve calls over his door as he climbs out.

"Nah." Billy looks over at him like he's just noticed he's there. "Got here right before you did."

Steve grins as he starts toward him, relieved. "Good. I was worried. Ms. Henderson asked me to come inside and have some of the tea she made, then she started asking me about college applications and- And I'm rambling. Sorry."

Billy shakes his head and stubs his cigarette out. It's a Herculean effort not to smile. "Such a good boy. And always in demand!"

"Not so much nowadays," Steve mutters. He ducks his head, shy. Embarrassed.

Billy wants to prove him wrong. Billy wants the cocksure Steve back, who kissed him like it was their last night on earth. Billy wants to tell him how much he wants him, like, all the fucking time.

Billy wants Steve to say that it doesn't matter how many other people want him, so long as Billy does.

But Billy is afraid, and he knows how easy it is for people to hurt you when you give them the power to. He knows Steve won't say that sappy shit to him. He's not Nancy fucking Wheeler, making Steve all heart-eyed.

He spreads his legs and hooks his fingers through the two belt loops at the front of Steve's jeans. He reels him in close between his knees. "Well, I don't have any *tea* to offer you."

"Just some sugar?" Steve looks so self-satisfied with the come on, and God he's such a *dork*.

Billy leans in and kisses him anyway, though. Mostly because he wants to, more than anything. Partly because he's worried that if Steve keeps talking his stomach will keep fluttering.

Steve gives as good as he gets. Billy sucks on his bottom lip and squeezes him a little between his thighs. Steve smirks into the kiss, which sends a jolt of liquid hot heat through Billy's entire body. Then Steve pushes him so his back falls against the hood and the ground slips out from under his toes.

If he were a weaker man, Billy would have whimpered. Instead he yanks Steve on top of him and snakes his tongue into his mouth. Steve moans into the kiss, and he doesn't hesitate to rest his weight on top of Billy.

Steve flicks open the last few buttons on Billy's shirt. He palms cold hands over the muscles of Billy's abdomen, and kisses him all the harder, like it hurts when his lips aren't on his. Billy hisses at the chill, but all discomfort flies from his brain when Steve starts to roll his hips.

The terrible urge to beg teeters on the tip of Billy's tongue. He lets Steve keep rubbing against him, but he turns his face away from the kiss, clenching his jaw tight to swallow back every groan and plea that wants to spill through. When it gets to be too much to keep in, Billy sinks his teeth into Steve's neck just below his ear and lets a

needy sound pour out muffled against his skin.

Steve gasps and melts on top of him like a pile of putty. Billy sweeps his hands up and down Steve's back, feeling the shape of his lean muscles. He nips at Steve's earlobe and holds him even tighter to his chest as he gives a whole-body shudder.

"Hey," Steve pulls back, breathing hard. "Hey. I know you're new to the guy thing. Do you wanna... Can I touch you?"

Billy burns with both humiliation at his own inexperience and pure, euphoric excitement. "You better," he growls, but Steve is already yanking open his jeans.

Steve wraps a hand around him and pumps firm and slow. He mouths sloppy, wet kisses over Billy's chest, and the younger boy tangles his fingers in his hair so tight it must hurt.

"Shit, Harrington..." His voice is shaky as his head lolls back. "S'good."

He works his hand faster, chest swelling with victory when a loud, deep groan stutters up from Billy's throat. He drags his tongue over a nipple, and Billy's arms stretch out so his hands can hold desperately to the sides of his car as he comes.

Billy's a little dazed, like he's been hanging upside down for an hour. He lifts his head, looking at Steve through his dark lashes. "Should I...?"

"Shh." Steve smiles sweet and dopey as he pulls himself out of his pants and settles back on top of Billy. He presses another kiss to Billy's lips, and when he reaches for him he takes his wrists and holds them lightly against the hood of the Camaro.

Billy could break his hold, if he wanted to. He's certainly strong enough. He goes soft and pliant instead, lips chasing after Steve's as he takes what he needs with every grind against his stomach.

It's not long before Steve's coming too, worked up by the build of anticipation and the look of pleasure that twisted Billy's expression. And Billy, Billy's a fucking mess, but he feels like he could run a

marathon.

Steve rolls off of him to stretch out at his side. He folds an arm and pillows it behind his head, sighing deep in satisfaction. "Damn."

Billy almost laughs. *Damn*. As if that even begins to cover how he feels right now. But really, would any words measure up?

"You'll be glad to know all the gossip was right," Billy drawls, but his voice is rough and tired. "You're a hell of a lay."

Steve snorts and slides off the hood to stand. "What a relief. Hold on, I think I have a towel in the car. You can get cleaned up."

All of Billy's limbs feel too heavy as Steve pads away. When he fucks around with girls, they can't get enough of him. They're clingy and cuddly and *talkative*. It's annoying as shit, but he feels like he probably wouldn't mind it if it were Steve. Yet there he is, already putting distance between them.

Did he do something wrong?

Steve comes back with the towel, and Billy is overcome with the desire to be those clingy bitches he hates. He wants to ask if Steve feels like grabbing dinner. Maybe a movie. Maybe a long drive where Billy can work up the courage to reach for his hand.

He swipes his chest and stomach clean, trying not to panic. He's got to be fucking cool, because if Steve Harrington laughs in his face he'll crack into a thousand pieces.

"Thanks, man." He rises up on wobbly legs. "I'll see you around, yeah?"

Steve blinks, caught off guard by the exit line. "Oh. Yeah. I mean, sure."

Billy flashes a smile and tosses the towel back. He climbs into the Camaro, holding tight to his pride, and winks before roaring away.

Notes for the Chapter:

It's been quite a while since I did the smut song and dance SO THERE'S THAT! I got the most amazing comments last time, and they all mean so much to me. Truly, your feedback is what keeps me at this. If you want to scream about this fandom or fling headcanons or literally anything, hit me up on my tumblr at [bisexualgoblin](#)!

8. Chapter 8

After that day at the quarry, they haven't been able to keep their hands off of each other. Before school they dip into the small bathroom that no one ever uses by the shop class, hiding away in a crooked stall to kiss until their lips throb. Between classes they pass each other with nudges of elbows, discreet brushes of their fingertips, sly smiles, and eyes that are hot with promises. On really good days, they have the time to sneak away between juggling the kids, homework, and their parents and get their hands down each other's pants.

Amidst all the fun stuff, there's talking. A lot of it. Now that the Upside Down cat is out of the bag, Harrington will sometimes get the courage to talk about all the things no one knows are going on. It terrifies Billy, but he listens. He bitches about Nancy sometimes- how they left things and how he should have seen the signs that something was wrong. That pisses Billy off, but sure, he listens to that, too. He raves about those nerdy middle schoolers and the stupid shit they do together on the weekends. Steve's happiest during those conversations, so Billy listens with a smile.

There are odds and ends in their conversations, too. Steve will mumble something about his father's ever present disappointment, or his mother's nervous, boozy smile. He'll mention how his grandmother (He calls her Gram Gram, and it's *adorable*.) made him the most amazing chocolate chip cookies he's ever had. He'll fumble through politics he only half-understands. Spend an hour trying to decide which Bowie song is the best.

Billy absorbs it all. He makes lists in his brain. Things Steve Dislikes. Things Steve Likes. Things Steve Loves. It's like Steve is his favorite hobby, and it's kind of sickening. This little obsession grates on Billy. He knows that as good as he feels now, there are going to be consequences eventually. It all puts him in a piss poor mood.

He's spoiling for a fight. He knows it, but that doesn't make it any easier to stop. It's lunch time and instead of meeting Steve to explore a new supply closet, he's out in the parking lot in the passenger side of his Camaro. His arm dangles out of the window, and a cigarette

sits precariously between his knuckles, burning down without him.

Steve appears in front of him out of nowhere, and he almost jumps out of his skin. The stupid fucking idiot makes him drop the cigarette he might've gotten around to actually smoking, and only offers a sheepish smile. "You doin' okay?"

Billy takes a second to take a deep breath. Steve didn't come here with accusations. He didn't come here with hurt feelings. No *you made me wait* or *how dare you*. He came out here to find him, instead, with concern and curiosity. He wants to know if he's fucking okay, and Billy doesn't know how to tell him he's not.

"Peachy." Billy gives him that smile that's supposed to get people off his back, but it looks like it just makes Steve nauseous. "Just wanted some air."

Steve nods, too slow and too long. "I like air."

It's the dumbest statement anyone could possibly make, but when Steve goes around to sit in the empty seat on the driver's side, Billy thinks that maybe Harrington has been fooling everyone. Teachers are exasperated with the guy, because every word he writes down on paper is garbage. Wheeler gives him those pitying little looks when grades come up. His parents have given him more than one lecture on applying himself. There's no shortage of people in line waiting to tell Steve how much of an idiot he is.

But there's a difference between acing a test and connecting with someone. When it comes to people, Steve is a fucking genius. All it takes is one look and he understands. You can spew a string of bullshit and he can read right between the lines.

Billy hates how that's exactly what he needs.

Steve reaches over and laces his fingers through Billy's. It's okay because no one is around and it's down out of sight. It's not okay because they've never done that before. No one has ever done that with Billy.

"El misses you."

Billy furrows his brow. "What?"

"From what I hear, you don't crash there anymore." Steve's being careful, but he looks so genuinely casual that Billy doesn't know how to call him out on it.

Still, Billy knows what shoe he's about to drop. He braces for it, but doesn't know how to avoid it. "So?"

"So... From what I *see*... What I *feel* when we're together, there's still a reason for you to need a place to stay." Steve's getting worked up, and his point becomes clumsier. Becomes a little too bare. "The bruises and the cuts, they look bad, Billy. Why do you keep subjecting yourself to that?"

Billy roughly tugs his hand out of Steve's grip. "Don't act like you know shit."

"I don't have to act!" And Steve knows he shouldn't be yelling, but Christ, why does Billy have to make this so hard? "I was there when it was happening, remember? I saved you once."

"Saved. *Saved!* Saint Steve, the patron saint of broken boys." Billy's hands shake as he fumbles for a new cigarette. "This obsession you have with saving, Harrington, it's no good. It's a fucking joke and it's gonna get you hurt."

"I can take care of myself," Steve insists. He plucks the unlit cigarette from Billy's fingers and throws it back at him.

Billy slams his fist against the dashboard. "You're gonna get *me* hurt, then, you selfish shit."

Steve deflates in his seat, mouth falling open. "Selfish?"

"You find people who are bigger losers than you are, and you throw yourself into some fucking charity act. It's what you do. You think you're being a nice guy, but you're just trying to make yourself feel better."

"Is that right?" Steve's voice is a little too soft and his eyes are a little too wet. Now's the time to start pulling punches, but Billy doesn't

know how to do that.

“Yeah. That’s right. That’s what you’ve been doing with the little dweebs, giving them advice and trying to help them be anything else besides the pathetic geeks they are. That’s what you did with mousy Nancy, before she found her own little project in Byers. It’s what you’re doing with me, the bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. It excites you, probably. But what you’re doing, it’s never for us. We’re not your fucking purpose in life, Harrington, just because you can’t find anything else.”

Steve kicks the driver’s side door open and slams it too hard behind him. He leans in through the window, eyes hard and cheeks a blotchy red. “It’s not about saving, Billy. It’s about two people caring about *each other*. But I see where I fucking went wrong.”

He storms off back toward the school. Billy got the fight he was looking for, but he feels just as jumbled up inside. Worse, because now he just feels guilty.

It’s one of those rare occasions where Neil is out of town on business for the weekend. Billy usually loves those days, but instead all he can do is mope around the house. Working out doesn’t sweat his guilt away. Throwing back a beer doesn’t make him stop thinking about Steve. Even music, turned up all the way and way too loud, can’t bounce the regret from his brain.

His mood is a ridiculous cartoon raincloud hanging over head, and he ambles out of his room at four o’clock on Sunday not knowing what to do with himself. He sees Susan clinking around in the kitchen with the dishes. They don’t have a bad relationship, exactly, but they do their best to avoid each other.

Still, he has to talk to someone or he’ll go out of his goddamn mind. Max isn’t going to be helpful. Tommy would laugh in his face.

“Susan?” His voice is quiet and tentative, but she still startles and whips around, almost dropping a mug. “Sorry.”

She sets the mug aside and waves off his apology in a frantic sort of embarrassment. “No, no. It’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting to see you out of your room. You’ve been a little...”

“Yeah.” Billy gives an awkward smile, and it’s his turn to be embarrassed. “I... Can I... Could you give me some advice, maybe?”

Susan blinks, like she thinks she might be hallucinating. She signed up to take on parenting duties for Billy, but once she met him she never really imagined she’d have the opportunity. “Of course.”

Billy sighs and drops his gaze to the floor. His cheeks burn. “I pissed off a friend. A really good friend. A... More than a friend.”

Susan laughs, but it doesn’t grate Billy’s nerves, because it’s a kind sound. “What did you do?”

“They were trying to help, I think. But I was a prick.” He jerks his eyes up in a panic. “Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s fine, Billy.” She looks kind of sad that she has to reassure him. “They were reaching out to you, but you pushed them away, huh?”

“Yeah,” Billy mumbles. “I was really mean. I think I made him sorry he ever cared about me in the first place.”

The room goes ice cold. Billy realizes his mistake immediately. Susan lets the silence stretch as she processes the gender slip. Not that she didn’t know. But to say it... She’s nervous and glancing at all the doors like her husband’s going to jump out of hiding.

She wrings her hands and takes a deep breath. “Billy...”

“Please don’t say anything to him.” He hates that he’s begging. He hates that Steve Harrington has made him this sloppy and reckless. “Please.”

“I wouldn’t,” she says a little sharply. She looks a little offended that Billy thinks she’d sell him out. After all, now that Neil’s finally put his hands on her, they’re kind of in this together. “I would never.”

Billy nods, because he doesn’t know how to thank her. She’s not his

mom, but she's something. And that's... It's more than he had before.

Susan tries for a smile, but only gets there halfway. "If this boy cared enough to reach out in the first place, he's probably as down as you've been. Apologize in a way that's special to him. Show him that you care too, even when you mess up."

"Yeah... Yeah." Billy smiles for real, thinking maybe he can actually contain the damage he dished out. "Thanks, Susan."

He grabs his keys and bounds out of the house, missing the fond, bittersweet look Susan throws his way.

Billy gnaws on his lip as he forces his feet to carry him to the Harrington's front door. His palms are sweaty around the Tupperware container in his hands. He's nervous, but his hopes are high. Steve is all about being a nice guy, and that includes forgiveness, right?

He plasters on his sweetest smile and rings the doorbell. A humble and sappy speech is on the tip of his tongue, ready to soothe all the hurts he knows he's caused.

The door swings open, and the smile falls right off his face. Nancy Wheeler is standing in front of him, hair messy and lips too red. The Tupperware creaks in his grip.

"Nancy," he says clipped and tight. "Steve here?"

She gives him a suspicious once over. "Who wants to know?"

Billy rolls his eyes. "*Me*. Who else?" Nancy just stares, unimpressed. "Are you going to get him, or what?"

"No." She squares her jaw, and if Billy were into chicks her defiance would probably be hot. "I'm going to tell you to leave."

Billy flushes with rage. The only thing keeping him from looming over her and snarling is the fact that Steve would never forgive him if he threatened sweet little Princess Wheeler. "I'm not leaving until I

have words with Harrington.”

Nancy puts her hands on her hips and stares him down. “Have fun spending the night on the sidewalk, then.”

There’s a shuffle from further inside the house, and Steve’s voice calling a confused, “Nance?”

While she’s distracted by Steve’s voice, Billy brushes right past her and into the house. He knows it’s a mistake as he’s doing it, but he can’t help himself. He wants to talk to Steve. Wants to see him. Wants to hold him and kiss him.

Both Billy and Steve stop in their tracks when they see each other. Steve’s mouth makes a surprised little ‘o.’ The last place he ever expected to see Billy was in his home.

Billy’s heart plummets to his toes. Steve looks just as mussed as Nancy. Maybe more. His sweater is a little twisted on his torso and his hair is sticking out in twenty directions. Billy’s familiar with the look. It’s what Steve complains about after they’ve been necking in the bathroom for twenty minutes.

And his lips. If Nancy’s were red, then Steve’s invented a whole new shade.

Billy wants to throw something, but the Tupperware just creaks and creaks in his hands. Nancy scrambles after him. Past him. She stops at Steve’s side, looking up at him with big, sorry eyes.

“I tried to tell him to go, Steve. He just slipped right in.”

“It’s fine,” Steve mutters. And it doesn’t look like it’s *not*. It just looks like he has no idea why any of this is happening.

Billy scowls. “If I knew I was interrupting something I wouldn’t have shown up at all.”

“What?” Steve’s brow is furrowed, and normally Billy would think that’s cute, but he’s just *so* angry.

“Does Byers know you’re banging his bitch, or is the secret part of the

fun?”

Nancy’s jaw drops as realization snaps onto Steve’s face. Followed by a boiling fury. “Backyard,” Steve demands, pointing towards the sliding glass doors. “Now.”

Billy stomps toward the door and slides it open with a slam. He wants the glass to break. He wants the walls to crumble. He wants the whole house to come crashing down over all of their heads.

Steve closes the door softly behind him, but when he turns on Billy there’s nothing soft about it. “What the fuck is your problem? You barge in and start bullying Nancy? Start accusing us of things that are *none of your business?*”

“I came here to apologize.” Billy’s laugh is an ugly, mean sound. He throws the Tupperware down onto the ground. “Thought maybe I hurt your feelings, Harrington, but I guess I misinterpreted a few things. King Steve really does get around, doesn’t he? And Nancy?” He gives a low whistle. “Not as prim and proper as I thought.”

He thinks for a second that Steve is going to hit him. He almost wants him to. It’d be a great way to get it through his thick skull that there’s nothing here between them.

Instead, Steve just huffs a laugh and shakes his head. “You’re jealous.”

“Like hell I am.”

“*You’re jealous,*” Steve continues. “And you’re a real dickhead. You don’t get to talk about Nancy like that, alright? Besides, whatever it might look like... That’s not it. We’re friends. Trying to be, anyway.”

Billy scoffs. The one thing he won’t ever put up with is being lied to. “I know what you look like when someone kisses the shit out of you, Pretty Boy. It looks like someone’s been running their hands through that hair for hours.”

“Yeah,” Steve snaps. “*I* have. That’s what I do when I’m trashed. We’re on, like, our third bottle of wine.”

Billy's eyes fall back to Steve's lips, and he lets himself realize they're just red. Not red and swollen. Just... Red. Stained red. "Oh."

"Yeah. 'Oh.' Jesus, Billy." Steve crosses his arms and levels him with a glare. "Is it not enough that you're an asshole at school?"

Shame slithers in cold in the pit of Billy's stomach. He breaks eye contact with Steve. "I just misunderstood, okay?"

"No. Not okay."

Billy bends to grab the abandoned Tupperware, stumbles and fumbles a bit, but holds it out for Steve. "I made you cookies. They're, um, they're probably not as good as Gram Gram's. I mean, they're kind of hard. But. They taste okay."

Steve looks at the baked goods shoved into his hands like he's never seen food before. "You made these?"

"Yes," Billy says quick and nervous. "I was trying to think of something you liked. Because I felt bad."

Steve smiles a little, and his eyes soften. "That's... Thoughtful. Thanks."

The weight that settled in Billy's chest the past couple of days eases. He toes forward and leans in, mouth aching for Steve's. Steve turns his face away, and Billy's nose bumps against his cheek.

"Stop," Steve commands softly, and it's sad but firm. Something inside of Billy rattles like a dying engine. "That's not how this works."

"It's not?" Billy's getting upset again. He wishes he had more control, but he doesn't. "Then tell me. Tell me how this thing is supposed to work. I apologized, didn't I?"

It's painful to Steve how much Billy really doesn't get it. "It's a nice gesture, the cookies, but it... It doesn't compare. You know that, right? You called me selfish. You completely ripped into me, and all I wanted to do was make sure you were safe."

Billy exhales heavily. The talking thing, it makes his skin crawl. "I didn't mean it, though. I was... I was already off that day, alright? It's not your fault that I just snapped, but you have to understand..."

"What?"

"It's easy for you to think about helping me, because you don't get how you can't." Billy tilts his head back and looks up to the stars as he talks, because watching Steve's face right now is unbearable. "If I don't go home, my dad finds someone else to pick on. Last time it was Susan. Maybe next time it could be Max. It's me or them, Steve, and I think we all know who's more worth protecting."

Steve shakes his head. "Billy, that's... Why don't you just go to the cops? Hopper would haul him in in a second."

Billy scoffs. "Then what? There's a trial, right? My word against Neil's. And who do you think looks more trustworthy? So then he's off the hook, and he's angry. Then next thing you know I'm missing from school and I'm... I'm just missing. In a ditch somewhere. But the official story is I ran away. Because I'm trouble and that's what I do."

Steve feels like he's been gutted. He feels like an asshole. He feels so completely powerless. "I didn't think, Billy. You're right. I'm sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry." That same stupid honesty is bubbling out of him, just like the night in the woods when he babbled on about his mom. "I like when you're around. I like that you get me, even if you don't get my situation. I like... Doing stuff. And the talking, I like that, too. Just... if whatever the hell we're doing is going to keep happening, then I can't be someone you're trying to save, alright?"

Steve nods. "I understand. But you can't... You can't expect me to always get where you're coming from. You have to talk to me, Billy. Shit. I'm not a mind reader. I put my foot in it a lot, but you don't have to lose your shit every time."

"Yeah, I get it."

"Good." Steve scratches nervously at the back of his head. "I like

when you're around, too."

A smile starts to stretch across Billy's mouth, and Steve glances inside to make sure Nancy's not watching before darting forward to give him a peck on the lips.

Steve sends him home after that, because Nancy will only wait so long. Billy feels like that fantasy world he'd built up might be coming a little bit true. But better, because it's real and when he fucks up there's a way to fix it.

Everything's coming up Hargrove.

But in the tree line behind the Harrington house, a monster paces. There one second. Gone the next.

Notes for the Chapter:

The grad school grind is picking up again, so I don't know how speedy updates will be. That said, you guys are so incredibly kind, and your comments and feedback are entirely the reason I keep coming back to write more. Thank you so, so much. You're what makes it impossible to stay away. Let me know what you think!

As always, if you want to scream about this fandom or fling headcanons or literally anything, hit me up on my tumblr at [bisexualgoblin](#)!

9. Chapter 9

Steve's standing propped up against his BMW in the arcade parking lot, with three unopened letters folded and stuffed into his jacket pocket. It's not how he wants to be spending his Saturday at all.

It's not that he minds driving the kids to the arcade. Hell, sometimes he joins them inside and gives Galaga a spin. It's not so bad, either, that if Max is here, that means Billy is practically chained to her side as per Neil's instructions. Billy's always great to watch and be around. It's just, when they're around the kids, Billy's not really Billy.

Billy's really only *Billy* when it's just him and Steve, and... Steve smiles. It's a sappy thought, but Steve takes a little bit of pride in that.

Still, there are letters burning a hole in his pocket. He thought maybe the kids could give him the courage to open them, but if they say what he thinks they say... The last thing he needs is to be embarrassed in front of a bunch of middle schoolers. A bunch of middle schoolers that are probably smarter than he is.

It's a couple minutes past when he promised Ms. Henderson Dustin would be home, but the five of them are shouting about something he hasn't bothered tracking, and at this point, it's too confusing to jump in on. He thinks about interrupting and dragging Dustin home, but Ms. Henderson never really minds, and Steve doesn't really want to be alone.

Billy- who's been content to just roll his eyes and smoke for the past ten minutes- slams his palm down on the top of his car. "Come on, Wheeler, don't give me that shit!"

Steve stops breathing for a second, looking between Billy and the kids and trying to figure out why there's trouble and how to stop it. For some reason, the others seem to be glaring at Mike instead of Billy, and Steve is desperate to figure out what he's missed.

"I'm just saying-"

"No," Billy cuts Mike off, tossing his cigarette off to the side. "I know what you're saying, and it's garbage. *Temple of Doom* can't **touch** *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. It just can't."

"But tonally-"

"Fuck that. If you want to sit through two hours of Willie Scott's bullshit, be my guest, but that shit's a mess."

Steve is about to dissolve into a fit of laughter, but then Dustin is clapping a hand on Billy's arm, and he's holding his breath all over again.

"Mike. Dude, Billy's right."

Mike's jaw drops open, and he looks like he's about to come to blows. "You're such a traitor!"

Dustin holds his hands out in front of him, defensive, but unapologetic. "I'm just calling it like it is, man. The guy's got taste."

Billy is looking as smug as ever as his grin stretches wide and wicked to taunt Mike. Steve... Steve just melts a little bit. He doesn't know how he spent so long keeping him at an arm's length. He doesn't know how he spent so long pretending he wasn't a person. 'Cause Billy, he's not perfect, but he's one hell of a guy.

He's fun and exciting in a way that can sometimes border on reckless, but when Steve is in the passenger seat of the Camaro as they speed by well over the speed limit, it's not the turns that have his blood pumping. He's determined and protective in a way Steve admires. It's sad sometimes, because he doesn't think of himself enough, and sweet because Billy will never openly admit to this part of himself. He's smart, and so shockingly funny that Steve is always on his toes.

He just... He makes Steve happy. He makes Steve feel peaceful in a way he thought he forgot he knew how to be.

"Besides," Dustin continues. "If Steve likes him, he's got to be pretty okay. They're always giving each other those *looks*."

Max pulls a face. "What looks?"

“You know,” Dustin flaps his hands between Billy and Steve- the two of them frozen like deer in headlights. “The best friend looks.”

“*Best friend looks?*” Lucas mocks. “That’s not a thing.”

Will’s eyes go a little wide as his cheeks go a little pink, like he knows a little too much. But if he’s not going to say anything on the matter, neither are Steve and Billy.

“Okay dickheads,” Steve interrupts as Billy shoots him a sly, growing smile. “Get in the car.”

Mike sends him an urgent look. “But Steve-”

“Billy and Dustin are right. The sequel is a pile of junk.” Frankly, he doesn’t have a strong opinion either way, but the way that Billy preens is worth it.

The boys pile into the BMW and Max slips into the Camaro. Billy and Steve exchange an intimate and private look. A longing for privacy. A longing for the real *SteveandBilly*. They stand as close as two friends are allowed.

“Best friend looks, huh?” Billy mutters. His expression is amusement and flirtation all balled up in one, laced with a promise.

And hell if Steve actually knows what they are, but he’s glad they have the time to figure it out. Because this? It’s pretty fuckin’ good. It’s like they’re in a bubble that’s rising higher and higher and it doesn’t feel like they’re ever going to come down.

Suddenly the letters in his pocket don’t feel as heavy as they did before. Not with Billy there and present. “Come over later?” Steve asks, soft and needy.

Billy doesn’t roll his eyes. He doesn’t pour salt in his desperate wounds. He just shrugs, smiling warm and real. “Sure.”

Billy’s been inside Steve’s house before, of course. Just the once,

when his attempt at an apology spiraled into an argument. As he follows Steve past the front door now, though, everything feels different. It feels colder. Empty.

It doesn't take Billy long to catalogue the difference. Nancy. She had been here last time, and Steve had filled every corner of the house. She had added a little bit of warmth and a little bit of comfort. With her gone, Steve looks like he's shrunk to half his size.

He looks embarrassed of his house, like it's not huge and pristine and perfect. He blushes a little at the echo of the hallways. The kitchen is big, and when he has to take big strides to cross it and grab a water bottle, it looks like he feels like he's crossing an ocean.

It's funny, because Billy has always seen Steve as a guy who was a little too big for a town that was a little too small. But this house seems to stretch on for miles, and it looks to Billy like Steve often gets lost for days.

Billy wonders, just for a moment, if he'll ever be able to change the way this house feels, just by being there with Steve. He dismisses the thought just as quickly as it comes. It's stupid. Guys like him, they don't keep things for long. They break, or they leave, or they're taken.

Better to savor as much as he can while he has it, before someone else fills the spaces Billy can't reach.

"Billy?" Steve's hand is back in his pocket. He holds the letters tight, like they're going to grow teeth and bite him. "I... I wanted to ask for your help."

The word *anything* dances on the tip of Billy's tongue. He holds it back. Pushes it down. "What?"

"I..." Steve pulls the letters out, and he hates that he's trembling a little bit. "I've been getting these the past couple weeks. From colleges."

Billy takes them, furrowing his brow. They're all unopened and crumpled, and they all bear the name of colleges that are a couple of

hours away. Too many hours away. “Acceptance letters?”

Steve dips his head, rubbing the back of his neck with a palm. “Or not. I haven’t been able to check.”

Realization hits Billy like an oncoming train. He jerks his head up. “You want *me* to read them for you?”

Steve doesn’t have to say yes. He doesn’t have to say anything. He just looks back at Billy with eyes that spell out **please**.

“Alright... Sure.” Billy swallows the painful lump in his throat and rips open the first envelope. It feels like he’s facing a firing squad. All he can think about is how far away Steve wants to run, while Billy still has one more year here to rot. Not that he had ever thought Steve would run away with him, but he had liked the idea of being stuck in Hawkins together.

But as Billy opens the letters, one by one, he reads a lot of empty consolations. The letters express their regret, but Billy’s sure he feels more regret right now than anyone who mailed off these rejections. “Steve...”

From the tone of Billy’s voice, Steve knows. He probably knew from the beginning. That’s probably why he couldn’t open them himself. He cradles his head in his hands and tries to remember how to breathe, but it doesn’t come easy. Everything’s a little blurry, and it feels like he’s been kicked in the chest.

“Hey,” Billy says, so soft and kind that it sounds odd coming from his mouth. “Hey, come on.” He pulls Steve toward the living room and sits him down on the couch that’s big, but not particularly comfortable. “It’s okay.”

“How is this okay?” Steve groans, wasting no time in pressing his face against Billy’s shoulder. Billy is a little caught off guard, but he wraps an arm around him anyway. “I’m a fucking idiot.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot,” Billy insists. He tugs Steve a little closer, holds him against his chest. “Why the fuck do you care what these snotty colleges think?”

Steve huffs. "Because I'm going to need a job to *live*, Billy."

"No shit. But why do you need *those* places? Why do you have to go there *now*?" Billy tugs on a lock of Steve's hair. "Take a gap year or something, Pretty Boy. Apply to community college."

Steve shakes his head, burrowing even closer so he's half in Billy's lap. "My parents would lose their mind."

"So what?" Billy snorts. "Fuck 'em. It's not their life. What is it you even want to do?"

"What?"

Billy rolls his eyes. "For a living?"

"Oh..." Steve chews on his lip. "I don't know. My dad wants me to come work for him, and-"

"I didn't ask what your dad wants you to do," Billy cuts him off. "Don't tell me you haven't thought about your own plan."

Steve pulls away from Billy, sitting back against the cushions, looking a little floored. "I... I guess I haven't. I don't know."

"Think about it now."

The saddest look twists Steve's face, and Billy would give his right arm to make it go away. "I'm not good at anything, Billy. Not really. I'm just going to end up some sad sack working at the car wash or something."

"Where's King Steve when you need him?" Billy teases. It doesn't work. Steve only seems to pull farther away.

Billy leans in then, and he kisses him. It's not the way they normally kiss, and it's terrifying. It's soft and sweet and... And where's there's usually heat and eagerness, there's just patience and care. Steve melts against him, like this is all he's ever wanted.

When Billy pulls away, he leaves his hand on Steve's jaw. "You're good at plenty, you just can't measure that shit with a test. You're..."

You're good. Kind, I mean. That's important. I think maybe you could do something with that."

"Like what?" Steve whispers.

"Well," Billy starts, and he's so terrified of the next thing he's about to say that his heart is about to hammer out of his chest. "I don't know right now. But I've got another year of school, so I'll be around to help you figure it out."

Steve gets the dumbest look on his face. It's downright dopey, and looking at it is like staring at the sun. No one should look that happy, not from something that small. Billy doesn't know what to do with all of that directed at him.

Fortunately, Steve has a pretty good idea of what to do. He swings a leg over Billy's lap, straddling him. The heat is back when he kisses him, fingers twisting in his curls and pulling as his tongue pushes. Billy wraps his arms around Steve and wonders if they're finally going to get to do something more than an urgent exchange of hand jobs.

Billy moves to Steve's neck, biting softly and doing his best to leave a mark. But then Steve's pulling away, muttering a soft, "Wait."

"What?"

Steve tilts his head, like a stupid adorable puppy, and asks, "What about you?"

"What about me?" Billy blinks, unable to track the thread of conversation.

"Yeah." Steve smiles, shy, as he plays with the buttons on Billy's shirt that barely do their job. "What do you want in life?"

It's a loaded question. One that gets more complicated the longer Steve is in his lap. "It depends," Billy mutters.

"On what?" Steve wiggles in Billy's lap, trying to get more comfortable, and Billy can't decide what's hotter: the friction or how interested Steve is in his answer.

“The way I see it, my life goes one of two ways. One way, it doesn’t really matter what I want. I can’t get over how angry I am. I lose control. I do something stupid and end up in jail, or, more likely, I end up dead.” Billy gives Steve’s hip a squeeze when he sees how upset the answer makes him. “The other way, I get help. I get my shit together. I try to be a halfway decent guy. I make it to college, maybe. Maybe I don’t. I fuck off and leave my dad behind, and make sure I’m nothing like him.”

Steve puts his hands on either side of Billy’s face. He holds him firm, makes him look him in the eye. “You’re nothing like him. Not even close.”

Billy reaches up and traces the places on Steve’s face where there used to be bruises. He reads the lies in Steve’s words that Steve is too kind to see are lies. “I’m sorry about what I did to you,” he whispers, and to Billy it’s more than an apology, and that’s scarier than anything. “Your face... I’m terrified of being that guy.”

“You’re not that guy,” Steve insists again. “I know you.”

Billy laughs a little, amused and too smitten for his own good. “You know me, huh?”

Steve rolls his eyes and leans in to kiss him again, short and sweet. “I’m working on it. You didn’t really answer me, though. If everything goes well- and it will- what do you want?”

If Billy’s honest, he hadn’t thought of much of a plan for his life. The happy alternative didn’t seem like a real option until recently. But he knows one thing he wants. One thing he wants more than he’s ever wanted anything before. One thing that’s only going to stick around for so long.

He moves Steve off of him, and before the other boy can protest, Billy is slipping to his knees on the floor. Billy moves between his legs, and Steve’s cheeks go bright pink as his jeans are unbuttoned. Steve lifts his hips as Billy tugs his pants and underwear down.

“Billy...” He doesn’t know what to do with his hands, suddenly. Flutters them from Billy’s shoulders to his face. “Billy?”

He doesn't give Steve's careful questioning a response. He mouths at Steve's inner thigh, because he can and he wants to. Fuck if he knows what he's doing, but he *wants*. He's been paying the price for wanting this for as long as he can remember, and he's not going to live one more second of his life without having it.

Steve's hands move to Billy's hair as he drags his tongue up the length of him. He whispers a string of curses under his breath. Billy takes the head in his mouth and sucks lightly. Steve pulls a little too hard on his hair, but Billy is fine with that. Kind of likes that. Billy moans softly, and it gets Steve panting.

Steve is easy, and Billy loves it. He doesn't know if it's just a Steve thing, or if that's just how Steve is with Billy. Billy doesn't care. He feels powerful when he's making him feel good. He feels like a king on his knees.

He slides his mouth down slow. He's slower dragging it back up. Steve is watching him with heavy eyes, and his stomach flips. Watching Steve watching him is everything. He feels himself start to sweat he's so hot for it. He bobs his head faster, clutching one of Steve's thighs so tight he's probably leaving bruises.

It sounds like every heavy exhale Steve makes punches out of him. On every third breath or so, a moan slips past his lips, like he's trying to stay quiet, but can't help himself. Billy preens, wrapping a hand around Steve's base and rubbing so his mouth brushes his own fingers with every downward slide of his lips.

Steve can't look at him anymore. His eyes fall shut and his head tips back. His jaw is just hanging open, like he doesn't have control of his own body anymore. Billy pulls back and flicks his tongue over the tip. Steve groans deep and loud as he comes, mostly on Billy's shirt, but Billy doesn't really care.

Billy feels like a god.

"Holy shit," Steve breathes, and he slides onto the floor and on top of Billy, limbs wrapping around him like a greedy octopus. He kisses him deeply, with more emotion than Billy thought any one person could contain.

Billy holds him close, a fraction too tight. He chases lips that have no intention of leaving. All of the fear that steals through Billy's heart and pumps through his veins like poison dissolves into this. Into Steve in his arms and feeling invincible.

Then Steve is spreading him out across the hardwood floor and putting his mouth on him. Billy's eyes roll up in his head, and everything he's ever been is turned inside out. If there's anything better than this, he doesn't think he could handle it.

So it goes like this: Billy falls in love with Steve first. But Steve is the first one to break his heart.

Notes for the Chapter:

So many thanks to the incredible people leaving me such kind feedback. I literally wouldn't be capable of continuing this without you guys.

Let me know what ya'll think, and as always, if you want to scream about this fandom or fling headcanons or literally anything, hit me up on my tumblr at [bisexualgoblin!](#)

10. Chapter 10

It's an unusually bright Tuesday. Not because of the sun in the sky, but because of Billy's mood. He and Max have been getting along surprisingly well, and they've even started to pile up a few stupid inside jokes. School has been a breeze, and none of the teachers have tried to pick on him for shit he hasn't done. Steve's been all over him, and if five straight days of orgasms doesn't put a man in a good mood, Billy doesn't know what else could.

It's the first time in a very long time that he wakes up at Hopper's cabin. The couch is still lumpy, but he's so familiar with the terrain that the twinges in his back are comforting. He can smell Eggos cooking away in the toaster, and hears the occasional slurp from Hop's coffee mug.

Billy sits up and stretches with a long groan. El beams over at him from the table, and he'll never know why she's always so happy to see him, but he'll never complain. "Some of those waffles for me, Weird Girl?"

"Duh," she drawls, bouncing over to the toaster. Hopper rolls his eyes. She'd heard the Byers boys flinging the word around while they were squabbling over music, and she hasn't stopped saying it since. In response to everything.

"You're gonna be late if you hang around here too long," Hopper mumbles as Billy stuffs half a frozen waffle into his mouth.

Billy shrugs, still chewing. "I'm always late when Steve decides to give me a ride."

Hopper's brow slowly inches up his forehead. "That so?"

Almost choking on the last of his Eggo, Billy tries to will the flush away from his cheeks. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing, kid," Hopper says too smooth and too amused. "Just interesting, you and Harrington."

“Yeah? You know what *I* find interesting?” Billy saunters over to the laundry folded in the basket, hooking his finger around the lacy strap of an undergarment that definitely doesn't belong to El or Hop. “You and Joyce.”

Hopper is in front of him in three quick strides. He snatches the bra out of his hand and hurls it off down the hall. “This conversation isn't about me.”

“No?”

“I'm an adult,” he insists, but he looks too embarrassed for the statement to hold much weight. El is smart enough not to say anything, but she's smirking awfully big. “Besides, if people start talking about me and her, there isn't going to be much trouble.”

Billy's eyes narrow into a glare. He snatches the mug out of Hopper's hands, downs the last of the coffee, and slams it down on the counter. “Didn't know you cared so much, old man. Don't worry, we won't draw too much attention to ourselves.”

“Hargrove. Billy.” Hopper sighs and moves to set the empty mug in the sink. “Billy. I'm not asking you to hide, I'm asking you to be smart. There's a difference.”

His grin is still a little too sharp when he shoots back, “When have I ever done anything smart?”

Hopper exhales a tired laugh, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “Yeah. You got a point there. Do what you need to. I'll stand by you, you should know that. But if the wrong person hears the wrong thing, I can't get you un-dead.”

It's a solemn warning. One Billy certainly doesn't need. Sure, he's been more reckless than usual, but he knows the score. He knows the clock ticking down on all of this. Knows that it might come with the end of school, or the end of summer, or maybe even long enough for Steve to finally get into a college somewhere. Might be sooner if Neil wises up. Either way it's tick, tick, ticking, and Billy hasn't forgotten that.

But it's nice to hear the warning from Hopper. It makes him feel a little bit safer instead of knocking some sense in to him like it was maybe intended to do. He feels... Warm. If he was the type to hug, he might be moved to do it now.

Then El furrows her brow, face too serious for any kid her age. "I'll keep you safe."

Hopper grips her shoulder and something rattles loose in Billy. His throat tightens and he turns sharply away.

Hopper mutters soft and low, "That ain't your job, kid."

"He's my friend," she says simply. "Friends help each other. Keep each other safe."

Billy is saved from having to deal with something like that by the honk of Steve's BMW. He quickly grabs for his denim jacket, plastering on a smile that's all bravado. "Duty calls."

"Mhm. Keep it in your pants long enough to learn something today, Hargrove."

El blinks up at Hopper, too curious. "What does that mean?"

Billy snorts, poking his tongue past his teeth. "Yeah, I'm not familiar with the concept, either."

Things start to shift that next night- the smallest of steps over a line that can't be uncrossed. The phone rings in the Hargrove's living room. Neil doesn't look up from the TV, and Billy crosses the room to answer it, because playing secretary counts as respect.

"Hargrove residence." There's nothing but a shaky exhale from the other end of the line, but it's enough. Billy's heart hammers against his ribcage. "Steve?"

There's something in his tone that makes everyone sitting around him look up. Max is worried, knowing what that name laced with panic

probably means. Susan's looking petrified, antsy that Billy's maybe given too much away. Neil is considering. Suspicious. A little too interested.

Billy doesn't pay attention to any of them. He turns his back, listening to the uneven breathing. "Steve, talk to me. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he says after a difficult deep breath. "Dustin's not."

"Is he...?"

"No!" Steve says quickly, pausing for a beat as he gets a little breathless again. "No. Shit. I'm sorry. No. He just... He was bit. We're taking care of it up at the cabin, I just..."

Relief seeps into Billy's bones, and he didn't know he was capable of ever being that concerned about that little nerd. "You just what? What do you need?"

"I just wanted to hear your voice," Steve murmurs too close to the receiver. Billy's face goes hot. "I wanted to talk to you and hear that you're okay. And I wanted your voice to tell me that everything's going to be fine."

"Everything is going to be fine."

Steve gives a short little sigh. "Thank you. And I'm sorry. I was stupid, I shouldn't have called you."

"It's okay," Billy insists, even as he's a little more aware of the eyes on his back. "I'm glad you did. If that's what you needed." He shifts his weight on his feet, lowering his voice and cupping the receiver with a palm. "Hey, why don't I come up there? Seeing is better than hearing, right?"

"I don't want to get you in trouble."

Billy shrugs, because what the hell, he's pretty sure he's gonna be in trouble either way. "You won't."

"No. Come on, don't worry about it. Hop's almost done patching him up, anyway." Steve hesitates like he wants to ask for something

different, but changes his mind and finishes with, "By the time you get here I'll probably have to drive him home."

Friends help each other, El echoes in Billy's brain. *Keep each other safe*. He wonders what people like he and Steve are supposed to do for each other. It feels like more. It feels like everything.

"I could swing by your place. After."

Steve inhales sharply before a long, drawn out pause. "Yes. Please."

Billy can already feel the migraine from the punch to the head he's going to get later, but he nods, even though Steve can't see it. "I'll be there."

"Thank you," Steve says with too much heart. Billy feels the pride bubble up in his chest and sizzle all the way down to his toes. "See you then."

They hang up, and Billy turns around. He looks straight past his father- which he knows must infuriate him- and locks eyes with Max. "Dustin got bit."

She swallows the lump in her throat. "By a... By a dog?"

"Yeah. He's going to be okay, but I'm going to swing by and help Steve out."

"I'm going too," she says in a tone that brooks no argument.

But Billy isn't in the mood to play, either, and as free as he's been with her whims lately, he's got Steve on the brain now. "No. You're not. You're going to stay here and mind your business. Anything too bad goes down, and I'll have Steve catch you on the radio."

Max kicks the leg of the coffee table, and Billy winces. Can't imagine what would have happened if *he'd* done that. "You're such a dick."

"Max!" Susan admonishes, but it's half-hearted and tired.

Billy just shrugs, already collecting his car keys. He gets to the door, almost makes it out without even having to acknowledge Neil, but

the old man shoulders in front of him. He grabs Billy by the collar of his jacket, jaw set and stern.

“I don’t remember you asking if you could go out.”

Billy grinds his molars. “Kill me for it later if you want. I’m going.”

Neil gives Billy a small shake. “To *Steve*?”

“Yes,” Billy bites back, knocking his father’s hold away. “To Steve. He’s a nosy, determined son of a bitch with one hell of a savior complex. He’s also hanging out with the chief of police right now, so if I don’t make an appearance, someone might come around asking questions.”

Shown up, shut up, and not liking it one bit, Neil sniffs loudly and manages to look straight through Billy like he’s glass. “Fine. Go to your little boyfriend.” Billy worms his way around him and out the door, but he still hears him when he shouts down the drive way, “But you better be back before midnight.”

Steve isn’t home yet when Billy pulls up out front of the too big house. That’s okay. He doesn’t mind waiting. He would wait for hours. Maybe days, if Steve asked him to. Really, it only ends up being about ten minutes.

The BMW rolls up next to the Camaro, and Steve is spilling out of the driver’s side before the thing is even turned off. He tears open Billy’s door and falls to knees, clinging to him and pressing his face to his thigh.

There’s a smear of blood across the back of Steve’s hand, so Billy reaches out and holds his fingers between both his palms. “Everything still okay, Pretty Boy?”

Steve nods, tilting his face up to look at him. “I’m just glad you’re here. I was worried you wouldn’t be able to get away.”

Billy smiles, the kind of soft, subtle quirk of his lips that sets Steve’s

insides on fire. "I lied and told my dad that if he didn't let me go, you'd send Hop to storm the castle."

"Maybe I would," Steve mutters. He presses a kiss to Billy's wrist, eyes grinning as his lips follow.

"No." Billy glances sideways at the light coming out through the windows of the kitchen, and ducks down low behind the open Camaro door to peck a kiss to Steve's lips unseen. "You would have stormed in yourself, like an asshole."

Steve laughs and pulls himself back up to his feet to start tugging Billy towards the house. "Come on. If we're lucky my parents are already getting ready for bed."

"And if we're unlucky?"

"Then you'll have to bring out some of that charm you're famous for." Steve says it like he's not impressed, but Billy knows better. Billy presses his chest hot against the line of Steve's back. He can't see him blush, but knows he is by the tone of his voice when he half-whines, "Not like that."

Billy's got a wolfish grin on his face when they slip inside, but sure enough, right there at the kitchen table is Mrs. Harrington, looking prim and proper as all her pictures lining the walls. Steve's steps falter a little bit, and Billy puts a more natural distance between them.

"Mom?" She doesn't respond at first, eyes glued to the magazine on the table. "*Mom.*"

When she looks up, she seems startled to see Steve in front of her. Or maybe anyone at all. She sits half-curved in on herself like Steve had started doing in October. Always a little protected. Always a little separated from everyone else.

"Oh! Steve! I didn't hear you come in." She blinks big, warm brown eyes that are a little unfocused by the glass of red wine beside her. It's probably not her first glass. Or the second. "And who's this?"

"Billy." He doesn't introduce him further or explain why he's there.

Just leaves it at that, plain and simple and lackluster.

So Billy takes it upon himself to get better acquainted. He takes a couple smooth steps forward and cradles her hand in both of his. "Billy Hargrove, ma'am. Wonderful to finally meet the great mom Steve talks so much about."

She blooms under the attention. Not the way that a long list of mothers do, where their eyes scream all the fantasies they're hot for when they look at Billy. No, Mrs. Harrington just brightens up. Becomes a different person. A real person, like she's spent so long being looked past, that someone noticing her at all is exciting.

"I like your friend, Stevie." She laughs, and it's the real one that Steve doesn't get to hear often. He melts a little. "Your friend can come over whenever he wants."

A big, stupid grin spreads across Steve's mouth and he starts pushing Billy towards the stairs. "Noted."

"Bring him over early enough for dinner next time!" She shouts at their retreating backs. "I want to get to know him better!"

Steve's laughing when they get to his room. Billy loves it. He loves that for a handful of minutes the tightness eases from around his eyes. Because Billy sees too much of Steve's mother in him. The loneliness, and the low simmering anxiety, and the desire to be anywhere but there all the time. And maybe Steve and his mom have gotten to this point for different reasons, but Billy hates it all the same.

Billy is the kind of guy who has to make a mistake a hundred times before he gets something right, but he wants to do it right on the first try here. He wants to make sure that Steve knows he's looking right at him, not through or past. He wants to listen and hear. He wants to be what Steve needs, so in twenty years time he's not sitting at the kitchen table, drunk, feeling alive for the first time because his kid's friend said two words to him.

Steve nudges Billy, guiding him to the bed before pushing him down. He crawls on top of him, slow and warm. Warm, not *hot*. Comfortable

and buzzing with something he only feels when he's next to Billy. He presses a short, sweet kiss to his lips and drags his fingertips down his chest. "Do you want to...?" He wiggles his eyebrows and taps his fingers below Billy's navel.

Huffing a laugh, Billy reaches out to tug gently at Steve's hair. "Always. But is that what you asked me to come over here for?"

The soft smile slips off of Steve's face, and he rolls off of Billy to lie next to him on the mattress. "No."

Billy scoots over so their shoulders are pressed flush. "Talk to me, then. What happened with the nerd?"

"Dustin and I were just walking, you know? We do that sometimes when he needs help figuring stuff out. We didn't mean to walk that far out, and it got dark before we made it all the way back to my car. And just... Out of nowhere it came. We weren't ready. I didn't have anything."

Steve shivers and Billy reaches over to thread their fingers. "But he's okay."

"Yeah. 'Cause... It's weird, Billy. I don't understand it. The demodog, it grabbed him by the leg and just started dragging. It didn't try to eat him, it tried to take him. And I swear... I swear there was a second one. I saw it, just for a split second. I think it was watching."

"Watching for what?" Billy asks, heart slamming around in his chest. Steve doesn't even look scared. He just looks empty.

"I don't know. For what I would do, maybe." He sighs, gnawing on the side of his thumbnail. "I tackled it. It didn't fight back."

Billy swallows, and the sound is too loud in the silence that pushes in around them. "What do you think they want?"

"I don't know." Steve rolls over on his side, facing away from Billy. Billy's worried for a second that he did something wrong somewhere along the line, but Steve reaches back and takes his wrist. He tugs until Billy rolls over on his side, too, and wraps his arm around his torso. "I just... I need to feel grounded."

Billy presses a kiss to the back of Steve's neck and holds him as tight as he can. He knows that he's not going anywhere. That he's going to be right here holding Steve until they both fall asleep. That he won't be back before midnight. "It's okay. I've got you."

Steve trembles a little bit as he whispers, "I need to feel what's real."

"I'm real." *This is real*, he wants to say. *What I feel. You and me and this thing between us.* But he doesn't say it.

Steve can't help but feel a little uneasy in the silence that follows. In the spaces between them without words, there's nothing but uncertainty. And it eats him alive.

Notes for the Chapter:

After conquering an impossible thesis deadline, I have returned! Thank you so much to everyone who left kind comments while I was away. I really appreciate you so much, and your feedback keeps this going.

Let me know what ya'll think, and as always, if you want to scream about this fandom or fling headcanons or literally anything, hit me up on my tumblr at [bisexualgoblin!](#)

11. Chapter 11

Billy runs. His vision is swimming. Everything's spinning and his eyes sting from the blood dripping from his brow. Blood pools thick in his mouth, too. Every labored puff is backed by the slick penny-like taste. He'd breathe through his nose, but it's swollen and dripping, too.

His footsteps are too loud, but he can't stop dragging his feet. He's tired and he hurts and he just wants to lay down. But he can't. In the middle of the woods, no one would find him. And he needs to get to Steve.

Steve.

Steve.

He thinks he's going in the right direction. Feels it in his bones, like his body sings the closer he gets to Steve. But it's dark and his head is pounding and he can't really know.

Billy Hargrove might die tonight, and all he wants to do is see Steve's face one last time. Hold him. Be held.

This morning Billy had woken up in Steve's bed, still curled around him like his arms could keep him from shattering to pieces. Steve had been awake, stroking his fingertips up and down Billy's forearm. They had been warm and the sunlight and been soft.

When Billy gave a sleepy, content groan, Steve and turned over and kissed him. Deeply. Morning breath be damned. But his eyes were sad and tired despite the surprisingly easy sleep he had won last night.

"What?" Billy had whispered, waiting for the blow to come.

Steve had placed his palm on Billy's cheek, just holding. "We're going looking for them tonight. The demodogs."

Let it be said that, even though his heart lurched in his chest, Billy never hesitated for a second before agreeing. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

“No.” Steve squeezed his eyes shut hard and pressed his forehead to Billy’s. “Not you and me. Me, and Hop, and El, and Nancy, and Jonathan. You’re not going.”

Billy pushed Steve back, eyes blazing. “Like hell I’m staying behind, Harrington. You nuts?”

“Billy. Listen. If I go out there, I’m killing those little fuckers. I’m going to be out of my mind pissed off. I won’t be myself.”

“So fucking what?” Billy scoffed, pushing up on an elbow. “You’ve seen me out of my mind. You’ve seen me out of my mind *at you*.”

“But if I’m keyed up like that, I won’t be thinking about you. I won’t be able to keep you safe.”

Billy isn’t safe. His chest feels tighter and tighter. He’s stumbling. Lightheaded.

Billy is going to die.

His foot catches on a root, and he pitches forward and eats shit. He rolls down a steep hill, mud seeping into his clothes and painting smears of brown next to the deep, sticky red. He grunts as he comes to a stop, body thumping against the base of a tree.

Every inhale feels like a punch to the gut. He’s gasping. Choking on dirt and mud and blood, and fuck, even his own mess of hair. He struggles up to his hands and knees. Sways and falters.

The rest of the night goes quiet around him. Too quiet. He slides his eyes closed and punches out an exhale. He knows he’s not alone.

A twig snaps and he opens his eyes. He sees something. It stalks and darts, but it disappears as he blinks. He’s shaking. A snap comes from the opposite direction, and he throws himself back on his palms to

face it. There's nothing there, but he backtracks with his heels scrabbling in the mud.

Leaves rustle at his side. He grits his teeth and curls his hands up in fists. "Come on. Come on then, you fuckers. Come and get me!"

Billy had been banking on three. Was ready to throw fists and heels and fight for his life. From out of the darkness, the demodogs emerge in a pack of fourteen. They circle Billy, shoulder to shoulder. The petals of their faces quiver, hungry and eager.

Billy is going to die, and it's been hours since he's gotten to touch Steve's skin.

A growl rolls up and out of Billy's throat. His veins are pumping enough adrenaline that he can't feel the all-over ache anymore. If he's got to meet his end like this, he's going to fuck shit up doing it.

He throws his body forward. Lands on his hip and slides through the legs of one of the demodogs, like he's some pansy-ass baseball player trying to make it to home plate. The demodogs are confused for a half of a second. Some of them lunge forward and crash into each other.

Billy scrambles up on his feet and runs for his fucking life.

He runs.

And runs.

And runs.

He keeps going until he can't anymore. The demodogs are hot on his heels, and he's one mistake away from being monster kibble. But his thighs burn and his feet are clumsy. His knees give out and crash hard against the rocks.

The demodogs flank him, and he knows this is it. He's dead. Then he looks up. And maybe he's not.

A streak of red light slashes down through a wide tree. It hangs there, glowing and throbbing. It's crooked and thin and jagged and it makes

the hair on the back of Billy's neck stand on end.

"Oh," he breathes. Because he thinks he might get it.

Billy and Steve had argued the entire time it took them to get ready for school. They'd argued *at* school- during lunch and in the hallway between classes, with furtive glances and matching frowns. After school, Steve wouldn't hear it. He'd just turned his back on Billy and left.

And Billy- Billy was annoyed. That was his first mistake. He had a fire in his gut and an itch under his skin. Steve- *his* Steve- was waltzing into danger, and Billy wasn't allowed to come. All he wanted to do was lash out against how useless he felt.

He was already in trouble. In trouble for leaving home last night in the first place, and then for not coming back like he was told to. He shouldn't have had an attitude, but he didn't see a point in playing the good son. He didn't have any respect left for Neil and he wasn't allowed to go out and be responsible for Steve. So respect and responsibility could go fuck itself.

When Neil had come home from work, he had zeroed in on Billy immediately. He called him a disappointment. A fag. And it wasn't like Billy didn't already know it was true, but it made his blood boil. Neil pushed him up against the wall, and his veins only pumped hotter.

He was slammed against the wall again, head cracking against the dry wall. He didn't flinch. Only burned. Neil slapped him, trying to get a response. None would come, because Billy's mind was on a boy and a bat and the monsters that haunted the town.

Neil punched him square in the nose, and something inside of Billy snapped. He swung back and caught Neil in the jaw. The motherfucker reeled and stumbled. He was shocked, and all Billy could do was laugh.

But Neil stopped being careful after that. Billy had, too, but as strong

and angry as he was, Neil was bigger.

They punched and wrestled and scrabbled until the walls and carpet were sprinkled with blood. Neil was mottled in bright reds that would bloom into bruises, and sported a split brow and lip. Looked like maybe he got into a car accident or something. It would make a good cover. Billy just looked like he'd gone a few cycles through a trash compactor.

It ended when Neil tangled his fingers in Billy's hair and smashed his temple against the mirror in the hall. The glass gave against the impact, a hole in the center that splintered out towards the frame.

Neil had left Billy on the floor. Stepped over him to go clean up in the bathroom. Billy dragged himself outside and considered climbing in to his car. He didn't feel like wrapping himself around a tree. So he ran.

A demodog leaps forward from the pack and sinks its teeth into Billy's leg. He screams and breaks the unnatural silence that suffocates the air. He's dragged on his back towards the red scar cutting through the tree. He keeps howling at the press of teeth into flesh, but he doesn't fight.

There's nowhere for him to run.

"Billy!" El's voice cuts through the stillness of the woods. It's not reserved and soft like it usually is. It's strong and panicked, and Billy doesn't like hearing it that way.

She's in front of him then, and she's lifting the demodog gnawing away at his calf, but that doesn't make it open its jaw. Billy screams at the pull of his skin, and El drops the monster back in the dirt.

Bullets start to whirl past Billy. Nancy's there with a grim look and a rifle, while Jonathan's at her side with a whim-ass revolver and wide, nervous eyes. Hopper breaks through the tree line with a shotgun, alternating between blowing holes through the demobastards and hitting them with the butt of the gun when they

get too close.

And Steve. Steve has his stupid fucking bat, and he's standing there, lit by the glow of the angry red gate. He swings the bat down on the demodog with its teeth in Billy's leg. Even as it screeches and releases its petal-shaped jaws, Steve keeps swinging. Hit after hit after hit after hit. El and the others have laid out all the other dogs, but Steve can't seem to stop ripping into the monster sprawled out between him and Billy.

It's a lot like looking at a pile of mashed up jello.

"Steve," Hopper barks, shoving his shotgun against Jonathan's chest and marching over. "Kid, it's over. Enough."

Steve ignores him, and Billy recognizes that gone look in his eyes. But he knows, too, that Steve is thinking about Billy right now. That's all he's thinking about.

"Harrington," Billy croaks, and it doesn't help. It makes Steve's jaw set harder, and the bat thumps with wetter, stronger **thunks**.

Hopper locks his arms around Steve's torso and physically drags him away. El reaches out, and the bat floats out of Steve's grasp. He deflates in Hopper's arms, like all of his energy has just been sapped right out with nothing left to hurt. Billy can relate.

"You're done," Hopper says calmly. He releases Steve. Guides him down to his knees beside Billy. Takes a step back and jerks his chin at the others, making them all shuffle back and look in random directions around the forest, too casual, like Steve Harrington isn't falling all over Billy fucking Hargrove.

"Billy," Steve breathes. His hands flutter over him, trying to check his injuries, yet too scared to touch. He's shaking. "Billy. You idiot." The insult brings a tired smile to Billy's face. "You don't listen. I already asked you not to tag along for this, but then you come out here *alone*?"

Biting back a groan, Billy reaches out and rests his hand at the side of Steve's neck. He gives it a weak squeeze. "Not everything's about you,

Pretty Boy.”

Steve furrows his brow. He leans in closer. Not close enough. Billy wants to be kissing him right now, in case all that blood leaving his body is more than he can stand to lose. “What happened?”

“Missed curfew last night,” Billy rasps, and Steve crumbles. Billy sees the guilt. The shame. The instinct to both pull away and fix. “Hey.” Steve’s still doing his best to bite through his own lip, so Billy tries again, firmer. “Hey. It’s fine.”

“Fine?” Steve huffs a laugh that is joyless and raw. “No. We’ve got to get you to a hospital, Billy. Come on.”

He tries to help Billy up off the forest floor, but he resists. “I can’t. I go there, they call my dad... I really will be dead.”

Nancy’s spent too long silent. Too long out of the loop. Her big eyes are a wash of genuine concern and tight disapproval. “You’re going to be dead if we don’t get that stupid head looked at.”

“She’s mean,” Billy whispers, teasing as he grips Steve’s shoulder. Too weak, too clumsy. He’s not doing too well. “I get why you like her so much.”

I have a type, Steve wants to say. Or, *Liked*. *Past tense*. Or, *She’s got nothing on you*. But his heart is heavy, and if this is how bad things get when they’re trying to be careful, he doesn’t want to see the consequences of a big mouth giving too much away.

“She’s right,” is all he says instead.

“No hospitals.” Billy is stubborn. He knows that. But he’s also stayed alive this long, in spite of himself.

Before Nancy can butt in again, Hopper crouches down low, getting an arm under Billy to help haul him up. “No hospitals. I’ll make a call.”

Billy's in and out of it for days. When he's awake, he's barely even half there. He's just too tired and (*he suspects*) drugged to the gills. Drugged with the good stuff. He can't feel a thing, and the room is all wavy.

Hop had brought in some sketchy doctor guy from Chicago. When Billy had been lucid enough to notice him, he hadn't liked him. Hadn't trusted him. He'd slurred insults and made patching him up as difficult as possible.

The doctor- Dr. Owens, Billy remembers now- had just turned to Hopper over his shoulder with a dry look, and murmured, "This one's as much of a headache as *you*."

Hopper had looked a little proud. Billy remembers that, too.

Mostly, though, the days that Billy is laid up in the cabin for are hazy. He knows that he's squirreled away in the main bedroom, while Hop's been sleeping on the lumpy couch. He knows that someone's always there, whether it's Steve, Joyce, Max, El, or the Chief himself. He knows that he looks like shit, too, if their furrowed brows are anything to go by.

Today though, when Billy is clear headed and a little achy from the drugs wearing off, he wakes up with Steve beside him. He's curled up on his side, taking up as little space on the mattress as possible. His eyes are tired, but open and unblinking as they stare at Billy.

Billy smiles, slow and sleepy. "The world end while I was out?"

"Once or twice," Steve whispers, reaching across the short distance to wrap his fingers around Billy's wrist. He needs to feel him, his skin warm, his pulse beating. "Billy, your dad-"

"He doesn't matter right now." Billy pushes himself up into a sitting position. "Is Hop here? El?"

Steve stops him when he tries to climb out of bed. He tugs him back down, arms locked around his shoulders. "They're out patrolling the woods. Lay down. Rest."

Billy tilts his face towards Steve, and for a moment the words die on

his lips. He'd forgotten how pretty the guy was. How desperate he was to see him when he thought it was his last night on earth. He has to take a deep breath to get the words flowing again. "Steve, you were right."

A stupidly cute furrow settles between his brows. "About?"

"The demodogs. The other night with you and Dustin, they *were* watching. They were watching me, too. I think they've been watching us for a while."

Steve is the one who pulls away this time. He half-falls out of bed and starts to pace the floor. "But why? *Why*? And who opened another gate?"

"That's the thing. I don't think anyone did."

"What?" Steve pauses his trek across the tiny bedroom, hands pushing through his hair, making it stand up impossibly tall. "You don't think El closed it? But Hop was there. He saw it. He would have made sure."

Billy slips out of bed, a little lightheaded after being horizontal for so long. "I think she closed most of it, but I don't think Hopper knew to look for anything else."

"What do you mean?"

"You ever punch a mirror, Harrington?" He can tell that he's thrown off by the question. Then the confusion shifts into annoyance, like he thinks Billy's dragging him along on some unrelated tangent. "Just listen. It's not like punching a hole through paper."

"... Okay?" Steve throws his hands up. "And?"

Billy can't help the smile that twitches at his lips. "And that's how the nerds explain the Upside Down, right? Like someone stabbing a pencil through a piece of paper. But maybe it's not paper that's keeping the two worlds apart."

"Maybe it's something more solid." Steve says slowly, turning the words over in his head. "Like a mirror."

“Right. And when you punch a mirror, there’s a nice big hole at the point of impact. But that’s not all. There are other cracks coming off of it, too. Splinters.”

Steve reaches out and grabs Billy by the shoulders. His grip is too tight to be comfortable, but Billy doesn’t shake him off. His big brown eyes are wild and nervous. “There’s got to be splinters all over Hawkins. And they’re only big enough for the dogs to slip through.”

Billy places his hands over Steve’s. He softens his grip some. “And they wanted to know which one of us had the power to pry the splinters open so something bigger can get through.”

“They know now. They have to. They saw El come save you.” Steve drifts closer and presses his forehead to Billy’s, careful of the healing cut on his brow. “They just need to give her a reason to open it.”

“Yeah.”

Steve starts trembling harder than before. Billy’s half-afraid he’s going to fracture into a million tiny pieces. He clutches at Steve’s ribs like he’s the only thing keeping him together. “They tried to take you.”

“I know.”

“They’ll try again,” Steve murmurs, and it sounds hollow. Empty. Like the bottom has fallen out of his stomach. “If they don’t take you, it’ll be someone else in the party. They’ll drag someone to the Upside Down because they need bait.”

Billy slides his palms up to cup Steve’s face, looking him square in the eye. “Not if we don’t let them.”

It’s right now that Steve really sees how fragile his grasp on Billy is. His father. The demodogs. The lack of solid ground in this unspoken thing between them. It’s all too easy to lose him. And Steve knows- is so, so sure of it- that if he lost Billy now he wouldn’t survive it.

He doesn’t know how he got here. He never meant to. Billy was only ever supposed to be nothing to him, but he became real so quickly that Steve couldn’t have stopped it even if he wanted to. He’s the

most real thing Steve's ever had. Maybe it's sad. Maybe it's beautiful. Steve doesn't care.

He crashes his lips against Billy's, twisting his hands in his curls tight enough to startle a moan out of him. Billy slips his hands up under Steve's t-shirt to rake his fingernails down his back, and Steve retaliates with a sharp nip to his lower lip. Billy is weak in the knees, so far gone for Steve Harrington that it takes everything he has to remember how to breathe as he kisses the life out of him.

Steve pushes the open shirt off of Billy's shoulders- one of Hopper's old flannels, too big and too shabby for Billy to ever wear while he's conscious. He flicks his tongue behind Billy's teeth as he tugs him forward by the belt loops of his jeans. "You feeling well enough for me to touch you?"

Billy laughs, a little manic, like a man stranded in the desert, praying at the feet of a man with a jug of water. "We're probably going to die, Pretty Boy. There's nothing that's gonna keep me from having your hands on me."

Steve scrambles onto the bed first and pulls Billy down on top of him. His lips find Billy's neck, just below his jaw, as he strokes his hand down the broad, beautiful expanse of his back. Billy rolls his hips, panting at the friction, and Steve's hands paw at his ass, dragging him closer.

Pushing Steve's shirt up, Billy bends to press kisses along his ribcage. He drags the flat of his tongue over a nipple before closing his teeth around it, just to see Steve squirm. And squirm he does.

He wiggles out of his shirt and tosses it across the room before gently pushing Billy away from his chest. "Naked. You should be naked." He unbuttons Billy's jeans and starts the struggle to tug them down.

Billy rolls onto his back and lifts his hips to help Steve rid him of his pants. As soon as they're tossed across the room- landing on a dresser and clattering several things over onto the floor- Steve is on him again. His palms skim over every unharmed patch of skin, like he's trying to commit Billy's body to memory.

Like he would have to even try. Every time he closes his eyes, Billy is all he sees. It's as if he's painted on the backs of his eyelids. That beautiful body, that beautiful smile, and those beautiful eyes.

"Billy," Steve moans deep and desperate. It sounds like a prayer. *Please God, don't let him die. Please, don't ever let anything happen to him. Don't ever take him away from me.*

Steve's jeans are open and Billy has a hand inside of his boxers, stroking firm and slow. They kiss like the world isn't falling apart under their feet. Like they have all the time in the world.

The look on Steve's face breaks Billy in two. In between lazy kisses, his jaw hangs open. His brow is knit like it hurts to keep the slow simmering pleasure inside. His face is raw and bare and Billy doesn't know how to survive putting the feeling in his gut into words.

"Wait," he breathes, knocking Steve's hand aside as it reaches for him. He twists out from under him and pulls open a drawer in the side table. Steve starts to trail kisses down the nape of his neck, impatient and incapable of doing anything but *touching*. Billy laughs and commands again, "Wait."

Billy fumbles around in the drawer until he finds what he's looking for. He turns and presses the condom and lube against Steve's chest.

Steve just stares. "I never wanted to think about Hopper needing these."

Billy rolls his eyes and tugs Steve on top of him, squeezing his hips with his knees. "Well, you can lay there imagining the Chief getting dirty, or you can fuck me."

"Now?" Steve's heart makes its best effort to crash through his ribcage. He swipes his tongue out over his lips and doesn't miss the way Billy's eyes track the movement, hot and eager. "Here? Are you sure?"

"I'm gonna have this," Billy insists. He hooks an arm around Steve's shoulders and kisses him long and deep. When they part, there's something gentler about him. "If you want to give it to me, I'm gonna

take it. I want this.”

It feels like all the air has been punched out of Steve’s lungs. “Billy.” He drags his nose along the line of his strong jaw. His hands are steady and sure as he opens the lube and squeezes it out over his fingers.

“Billy,” he chants, having more to say, but afraid of sending the other boy running. *Tell me you’re all mine. Tell me it’s me you want, not just someone.*

Steve presses a finger slowly inside of him, and Billy’s mouth falls open. He pauses, partly to look at the way pleasure plays across Billy’s face, and partly to make sure he takes his time. “Alright?”

“Yeah,” Billy huffs, equal parts embarrassed and eager. “Keep going.”

His finger presses deeper, and Billy’s kissing him sweet and soft. Billy’s cheeks are flushed and his lashes dip as he shyly refuses to meet Steve’s eyes. When the tip of Steve’s finger brushes his prostate, his gaze snaps upward in an instant.

His stomach muscles clench and he gives a whole-body shiver. “Oh fuck.”

A grin spreads slow across Steve’s mouth. “Tell me about it.”

Billy snaps, sweet kisses and shyness thrown out the window. He’s hungry and he’s getting something he’s been terrified to want for so long. He cups the back of Steve’s head with one hand and pushes his tongue past his teeth to drag across the roof of his mouth. His other hand grips Steve’s hip hard, a silent encouragement to get things moving along.

Steve hooks Billy’s knee over his arm as he presses a second finger inside of him. A strained whimper slips through a kiss, and Steve tries to pull away. Billy just yanks on Steve’s hair, tipping his head back to give him a dangerous glare. “Don’t you dare stop.”

So he doesn’t. He spreads and strokes and twists his fingers, drawing gasps and stuttering groans out of Billy. Billy starts to rock his hips, pushing back against Steve’s hand. Steve can’t stop smiling, a sex-

delirious euphoric expression.

He pulls away and Billy whines, a needy pout pinching on his lips. Steve would laugh if he wasn't too occupied fumbling out of his jeans and boxers. As soon as he's naked, Billy is grabbing at him again-kissing his lips and neck and any other patch of skin he can reach.

"Come on," Billy eggs him on. "Come *on*."

"Hold on," Steve mutters, leaning into another kiss he smirks the whole way through.

He rips the foil packet of the condom open and slips it on. Billy is antsy, shifting restlessly even as he spreads his legs wider in invitation. Steve wraps his hand around Billy's length, stroking a too-light teasing palm over him before he starts to carefully push inside.

Billy reaches back to grip the headboard, exhaling heavily. Steve watches the flex of his bicep and the flutter of his lashes as he feels how tight he is around him. His hips jerk on their own accord, and Billy's next breath is a sharp inhale.

"Sorry," Steve whispers, dropping kisses along Billy's collarbone.

Billy just shakes his head. He arches his back, testing the drag of movement inside him. He presses his face to his arm, hiding as he takes a few moments to adjust. When he's good and ready, he roughly palms Steve's ass, wordlessly commanding him to move.

They rock together at a leisurely pace at first, but despite the softer feelings taking root in their chests, that's not what either of them are after right now. Billy's hands are too pushy and demanding for Steve to pretend otherwise, and the urgency of death feels like it's waiting just outside the door.

Billy's calves find their way over Steve's shoulders, and the hand on the headboard becomes necessary when he starts to scoot up the bed. Steve's hips drive *in, in, in*. They're not so much kissing anymore as they are bumping lips as they pass.

Heat pools in Billy's gut, and he almost asks Steve to put his hand back on him, but he doesn't want this to end. Not yet. He doesn't

know if this first time is the last time, and he'd rather it just last forever instead of having to worry about it.

Billy wraps his mouth around the meat of Steve's shoulder, denying his lips the chance to say a desperate string of words he's too afraid Steve won't say back.

Steve just whispers Billy's name on a sigh. He wants it to sound like *I love you*. He wants to lay the words between them without having to play the fool who takes the real risk. So he hopes. He wishes. "Billy."

It means *I love you*, but Billy has been denied affection for too long to understand the language.

Notes for the Chapter:

If you like what you're reading, please, please keep the feedback coming! I tend to prefer to work on one-shots and shorter form stories, so it's been hard in the final stretch of this doozy!

And of course, as always, if you want to scream about this fandom or fling headcanons or literally anything, hit me up on my tumblr at [bisexualgoblin](#)!